


# Fifth International

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## New York 2050?

An aerial photograph of New York City, showing the dense skyline of Manhattan and the surrounding areas, including the Hudson River and the East River. The image is used as a background for the main title and subtitle.

### Progress versus Nature?

Can Marxist theory  
and class struggle avert  
environmental catastrophe?

**5**  
Volume 2, Issue 5

# Fifth International

Volume 2, Issue 5, March 2008



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# Editorial

A few years ago the global warming debate passed into history. Very few outside a small and isolated fringe give any credibility now to the climate change sceptics. Indeed, most meteorologists agree that 2007 was the hottest year on record - beating the previous record set in 1998. Its effects are now a matter for headline: fast retreating glaciers from Greenland to Peru. In Summer 2007 the Northwest Passage in the Canadian Arctic was completely free of ice for the first time in maritime history and it seems likely that the Northeast Passage around Siberia could soon be so too.

A heat wave swept across southern Europe and North America, destroying crops and houses on a huge scale. At the same time, the monsoon season in South Asia was extraordinarily severe, causing devastating flooding in Bangladesh and parts of India. A consensus now exists amongst the ruling class and the political establishment "that something must be done" even if they cannot agree on what exactly that is, or the extent of the measures to be taken.

So, as the events of 2007 demonstrate - coming on top of the great New Orleans disaster of 2006 - climate change and, more generally, environmental degradation, has become the urgent political issue of our day. We are pleased then, that two articles in this issue deal with this hugely important question. Joy Macready looks at the intensifying international debate on climate change, while Luke Cooper shows that contrary to prevalent "Green" prejudices, genuine Marxism is not productivist in the sense of Stalinist industrialisation which wreaked havoc on the natural environment. He shows that the analytical tools of Marxism can be harnessed to show how environmental degradation is systematically created by capitalism and that only its abolition can restore

a harmonious balance between our species and the natural world.

Looking back on the last year, we once again see a world beset with political crisis and turbulence. The global financial crisis looks set to bring a world recession. While the neoliberal offensive against workers gains has continued apace. America achieved a relative and temporary stability in Iraq only to suffer damaging reverses in Afghanistan that spilled over into Pakistan for good measure. It seems, then, that the structural disequilibrium of world capitalism has continued to spark social upheavals, crisis and resistance. But, as the case of France demonstrates, the global movements of resistance are beset with problems. As Marco Zito argues with respect to the events of the last year, the idea that the historic dichotomy between the revolutionary and reformist strategy can simply be put to one side is fundamentally wrong. He asks can the French workers build a revolutionary party? And, concludes that - despite all the obstacles - the answer is yes.

There are few countries that have occupied the attention of leftists the world over as Venezuela in recent years. Many have rashly concluded Hugo Chavez is leading a socialist revolution, while others have rightly been more critical. Clearly, there is an urgent need for revolutionaries to engage with forces in the country. In this spirit we are pleased to publish the English language translation of recent correspondence between the League for the Fifth International and the PRS-UIT in which we debate the tactical and political issues at stake.

The rise of China as an industrial power is another issue which has rightly occupied the attention of many leftists and commentators. But to what extent has China changed world capitalism, or rather, more specifically, to what extent is its growth

dependent on its close ties with the United States? World attention will certainly be focused on China as it hosts the Olympic Games - an event treated with great significance by Communist Party chiefs as expressing the arrival of China to the top of the world stage. Exposing popular misconceptions, Peter Main shows talk of China being "at the top" is decidedly premature.

The death of George Habash in January 2008 was met with great sadness across the Arab world amongst secularists and democrats. As one of the founders of the PFLP, he was a leader who was synonymous with the heroic days of the Palestinian struggle (second in prominence only to Yasser Arafat). His death gives us an opportunity to review the experience of the PFLP, its successes and mistakes, with the hope that forces across the region can learn from these and take steps towards the formation of new revolutionary parties. Finally, in our review section we have articles on Reading Lolita in Tehran by Azar Nafisi, Between Equal Rights by China Miéville, Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion and Alex Callinicos' pamphlet Universities in a Neoliberal World.

If you like this issue of the journal - even if you do not agree with every view expressed in the analysis - why not consider taking out a subscription to help us with its regular appearance? The regular payment not only ensures you receive your copy as soon as it is printed, but also helps our financial planning. The League for the Fifth International is currently occupied with extensive international commitments, as we develop the work of sympathising sections in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and take forward discussions with activists and currents in both Latin America and the Middle East. This all costs money - so if you see the value of such work a subscription or a donation (great or small) helps us take forward this work.

# The science of climate change

Joy Macready

Climate change is now widely recognised as a scientifically verified fact – one that is wreaking havoc on the environment and human society across the globe. For example in the summer of 2007 over 3,200 people in Bangladesh lost their lives as a result of Cyclone Sidr, with another two million struggling for basic necessities like food, water, shelter and medicines. At one point, almost 80 per cent of the country was under water.

More recently, at the beginning of 2008 China was suffering its worst drought in a decade after the rainy season ended nearly a month early; this has left millions of people short of drinking water and has shrunk reservoirs and rivers.

These catastrophes are the shocking reality of climate change – it impacts the weather patterns across the globe causing droughts, floods, desertification, temperature increases, plus an increase in wild and unpredictable weather like hurricanes. This wild weather has a serious effect on human existence, destroying livelihoods, housing and lives, especially those in more desperate conditions such as Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world.

But it is not just Third World nations that are suffering from the effects of climate change – consider the devastating results of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In the richest nation on earth, the poorest layer were left to fight for survival or drown as the levees broke, and then were gunned down by the national guard as they tried to gather supplies for the thousands left without food or water in the sports stadium. The waters of the Gulf of Mexico that fuelled Katrina were at near-record warmth – tropics are part of a global trend towards ocean warming that goes hand in hand with atmospheric warming culminating in a documented increase in hurricane intensity since the 1970s.

The problem is compounded through

a positive feedback mechanism – i.e. the more greenhouse gases pumped into the atmosphere, the greater the effects that could cause the planet heats up exponentially. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has re-evaluated its initial estimate of a rise in average temperatures of between 1.4 and 5.8C and now predicts that temperatures could rise as much as 6.4C by the end of the century as the oceans and land become less able to absorb CO<sub>2</sub>. The layer of permafrost in Siberia, which contains huge amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> is already thinning – if it melts then all the trapped CO<sub>2</sub> is released into the atmosphere with potentially devastating results.

The international response to the threat of climate change has been woefully inadequate. After years of UN-sponsored summits, not one country has lived up to its commitments in reducing the amount of greenhouse gas emissions – many, in fact, are continuing to increase emissions while trying to greenwash their national policies to avoid international shame. But the pressure is on to act now and reduce the human contribution to climate change before the damage becomes irreversible.

## TERMINOLOGY

Scientists are in basic agreement that human activity is driving climate change. Global warming stems from the increase in greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, in the atmosphere, mostly put there by the burning of fossil fuels. How does the burning of fossil fuels, whether by driving a car or powering a coal fire station, add to global warming?

The sun emits light and radiation that heats the atmosphere and warms the surface of the earth – about 30 per cent gets reflected or scattered back to space by clouds, dust, and ground surfaces like ice; more than 20 per cent is absorbed in atmosphere mainly by clouds and water vapour; and almost 50 per cent gets absorbed by the earth's surface, by the land, forests, pavement, and the oceans.

The earth itself also radiates heat.

The air has two main components – oxygen (20 per cent) and nitrogen (78 per cent) – both of which are ill suited to absorbing the earth's radiation because of their linear, two-atom (diatomic) structure. But other gases that have three or more atoms are greenhouse gases – because of their molecular structure they have the ability to capture energy far out of proportion to their limited presence. So the heat that is normally radiated to space is instead absorbed within the earth's atmosphere by greenhouse gases and radiated back to earth, effectively increasing the earth's overall temperature.

The chief offender is carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) which constitutes about 53 per cent of the human-produced greenhouse gases; the next is methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) at 17 per cent; then ozone (O<sub>3</sub>) at 13 per cent, nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>) at 12 per cent, chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and water vapour (H<sub>2</sub>O). CO<sub>2</sub> is produced when fossil fuels are burnt, as well as when humans and animals breathe and plants decompose.

All of these greenhouse gases appear at different levels and have different longevity depending on the level within the atmosphere. For example, airplanes may only emit 2 per cent of total CO<sub>2</sub> but greenhouse gases have a much bigger impact when they are emitted at high altitude, what is called a cumulative effect – in the cold high level air the gases send even less of the heat they absorb into space.

The more greenhouse gas that is added to the atmosphere, the more the planet warms – as CO<sub>2</sub>, and other gases accumulate, they block each others ability to radiate heat into space causing the atmosphere to heat further. This forms what is called a positive feedback mechanism – the more gases released, the more it amplifies the effects of climate change, which can lead to an exponential increase in temperature. It is not a linear progression because of the interconnectivity of ecosystems and the deli-

cate dynamics which, when unbalanced, can have much farther reaching and unforeseen effects.

## WEATHER PATTERNS AND ECOSYSTEMS

The freakish weather that much of the world is experiencing is due to the increase in average global temperature. As the temperatures increase and the ice caps begin to melt, the sea levels begin to rise – the IPCC projects that the mean sea level will rise 90 – 880mm within the next 50 years. Warmer ocean waters also help give birth to tropical cyclones and provide the conditions they need to grow into hurricanes.

Oceans cover 70 per cent of the earth's surface and play an important role in shaping weather and climate through ocean-atmosphere cycles. The most important cycle is ENSO (El Niño/Southern Oscillation), whose two modes are known as El Niño and La Niña, in the Pacific Ocean. El Niño is a warmer than normal current with weaker than average trade winds. It hikes up the odds of drought across Indonesia, Australia, India, Southeast Africa, and northern South America. La Niña is cooler than normal with stronger than average trade winds that push cool winds westward into central Pacific increasing the monsoon effect.

A change in these currents brought on by global warming will have unpredictable and devastating effects, whether it is floods or droughts, desertification, deforestation, crop failures, and heat waves.

This will also bring about massive change in the flora and fauna of regions as some species are pushed into new territories or higher altitudes. Some species will die out or become extinct. In a 2004 study by Charles Thomas of the University of Leeds, the effects of climate change up to 2050 may threaten as many as 37 per cent of all species with extinction; even at a 2.0C change in temperature, the Stern Report estimates 15-40 per cent of species could face extinction.

All species' life are based within ecosystems which are complex sets of ecological structures based on relationships and interdependencies within a region or biome, regions that share similar traits of climate and landscape. To wipe out one species within an ecological web can have repercussions affecting

the viability of the whole ecosystem. For example if a predator is made extinct, this can lead to a population explosion of another species that can then force out other species within the ecosystem.

This developmental or evolutionary process does happen naturally in the sense that ecosystems are not static systems but dynamic and changing, but the degree to which climate change will speed up this process is profound and may make adaptation to such changes impossible for most species.

## INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

Ecosystems do not abide by the laws of national boundaries, nor do greenhouse gases and the havoc that they can potentially unleash, so any answer to climate change has to be an international response. This is especially true since a few highly industrialised nations have produced the lion's share of greenhouse gases and contributed more to where the world is at today than the mass majority of the world. For example, the US is still the biggest polluter, accounting for 20 per cent of greenhouse gases even though it has only 5 per cent of the world's population. The UK now generates 2 per cent of the world's emissions but only has 1 per cent of the world's population.

What is particularly unjust is that the undeveloped countries that have historically contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions are disproportionately the worst hit by "natural" disasters because of their lack of infrastructure due to poverty and also a greater reliance on raw natural resources for subsistence, whether it is farming, fishing or hunting.

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit was the first attempt by the international community to get together to discuss and agree targets to address climate change. Five years on from the Brundtland Report, which put the United Nation's weight behind the term "sustainable development", the Rio Summit brought together close to 30,000 participants, including representatives from 172 governments, some 2,400 representatives of non-governmental organisations, with 17,000 people at the parallel NGO Forum, who had so-called Consultative Status. [In the lead up to the Earth Summit, it was discovered that the Rio de Janeiro police were executing street children, so

that they wouldn't offend the delicate senses of these important attendees.]

The agreement on the Climate Change Convention set no mandatory limits on greenhouse gas emissions for individual nations and contained no enforcement provisions therefore it was legally non-binding. The participants pledged to "try" and stabilise greenhouse gas emissions at 1990 levels by 2000. Even then it was a struggle to get the world's biggest polluter, the US under George Bush Senior, to sign up to it; but he did and is actually the only president to have such an agreement on climate change ratified in the Senate – but it was legally non-binding.

This agreement morphed into the 1997 Kyoto Protocol in order to provide legally enforceable emissions reduction targets. Those that signed up to the protocol committed themselves to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions averaging 5.2 per cent below 1990 levels by 2012. Although President Clinton signed up to the protocol, he refused to take the treaty to the Senate for ratification and when George W Bush came to power, he shelved it altogether.

The latest round of negotiations, in Bali in December 2007, is supposed to take the world beyond 2012 (when Kyoto expires) – but not a single reduction goal for after 2010 is included in the final text agreed at the summit.

So, effectively, the 12,000 participants at the Bali Summit agreed simply to keep talking. Under the arrangement delegates approved a timetable for a series of international summits over the next two years which is planned to culminate in a full agreement being reached at another UN conference in Copenhagen in late 2009.

Before the summit began the IPCC, the official sponsor of the conference, had submitted a document calling on the industrialised nations to cut their greenhouse gas emissions by 25 to 40 per cent by 2020 (compared to 1990 levels) in order to start to address climate change. This was rejected by the US, with Canada, Australia and Japan trailing along in its wake. A compromise draft agreement stating that global emissions should peak within the next 10 to 15 years and then be cut by half by 2050 was also rejected, leaving only the vague commitment devoid of specific carbon emission reduction targets. Instead of concrete targets, the statement talks of

the need for "deep cuts in global emissions" and called for a "long-term goal for emissions reductions" – both just empty phrases.

This is a far cry from the "historic breakthrough" that most of the EU governmental participants have hailed as the outcome. Due to the effective stonewalling by the US delegation, delegates from the other 186 countries were so helpless against the world's single superpower they had to resort to booing at the US delegation's obstruction tactics. Everyone knew, whatever the public hypocrisy, that any agreement was not worth the paper it was printed on if the biggest polluter in the world would not sign up to it.

The Europeans tried to cover this charade by declaring they had won a 'moral victory'. They claimed that consensus was only reached following "a last minute U-turn" from the US after some behind the scenes haggling. Yet the White House was quick to release a statement that Bush's position had not budged one iota.

So even though the US has agreed to continue "negotiating" to avoid being internationally isolated, it has not agreed to any action. Instead the US has created its own parallel process with the countries accounting for 85 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. Some European officials threatened a boycott of the January meeting in Hawaii called by the White House, if the US did not agree to a common statement in Bali.

What became apparent at the summit was that most participants believe that when the Bush regime ends, the US will finally play ball. As though what was at stake was the stubbornness of one not very bright president rather than the interests of a world plundering, capitalist, ruling class. Certainly presidential hopefuls have jumped on the global warming bandwagon, with Democratic frontrunners Hillary Clinton and Barrack Obama joining Republican frontrunner John McCain in insisting it was an issue to that had to be faced. Yet, like the Bush administration, no one has promised to impose specific targets to reduce carbon emissions if this would hurt the US economy.

And the economy question is in the back of the Europeans minds as well. Even though they, together with China, India and other emerging industrial countries, were pushing for specific tar-

gets, most of the EU nations will not even achieve the completely inadequate targets set out by the Kyoto Protocol. Their position is not driven by genuine concern for the environment, but securing the long-term future of the \$30 billion Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) and maintaining Europe's domination of the world carbon commodity trade. The ETS has done nothing to significantly reduce emissions in Europe, but it has spawned an enormous international market in carbon investment and speculation, which is what the presidential hopefuls are also looking to get a slice of.

"More than \$60 billion changed hands in the global carbon market this year, double the trade of last year and up from just \$400 million three years ago," reported an article in the Sydney Morning Herald titled "Bali's Business Bonanza". "Analysts estimate the market could be worth \$1 trillion within the next 10 years. By 2030, according to some carbon bulls, it may even be the biggest commodity market in the world, overtaking crude oil." This is the central concern of the Bali discussions – how to make money out of climate catastrophe.

So was their any political will there to make the shift from a carbon-intensive world economy? The short answer is no. Under capitalism, the drive for profits trumps environmental protection every time, until it is too late. No country will do anything that undermines their ability to compete on the global market, because accumulation and profit are the main drivers of the capitalist way of life. Ironically these huge international talking shops are simply adding to the problem by generating so much more CO<sub>2</sub> emission flying all the world leaders there!

## THE SOCIALIST SOLUTION

Five years ago the big corporations and imperialist governments were still denying or minimising the already massive evidence of climate change. In the last year or so all of them (even Bush) have dropped this approach because they were aware of the effect it was having in discrediting neoliberal capitalism and radicalising effect it would have worldwide. That was why corporations and most politicians turned to a huge campaign of greenwash, trying to fool their

customers or electorates that each of them was "greener than thou."

In fact capitalism with its reckless using up of raw materials and foodstuffs, its systematic pollution of the atmosphere and the seas, its exhaustion of the soil and destruction of the ecosystem, can not take the actions sufficient to avoid catastrophic and mounting extreme climate events. To do so requires setting aside the mad chase for profit, the unbridled consumerism of a tiny proportion of the world's population combined with shortages of the basic necessities for the rest. To avoid this danger, to actively reverse the spoliation of humanity's living space, means a conscious effort towards that goal, not fiddling with markets forces whilst the planet burns.

Only a socialist solution – one that is based on a democratically planned world economy – can really hope to tackle the causes of climate change. What does that mean? It means we need an international solution, one that is based on the needs of the majority of society, not the desires of a privileged minority. We must democratically decide how we want to develop infrastructure and industry to meet these needs – not leave it to the "elected" leaders that make decisions that only benefit the ruling class. We must make a global shift away from the burning of fossil fuels and towards cleaner technology. All of these objectives will only be met if we radically transform our society. For this we need an international revolutionary movement that can challenge the capitalists and overthrow the system that keeps the majority of humanity in abject poverty and misery. For this we need a party of world revolution – a Fifth International – to fight for power.

# Getting the measure of China

*In the last issue of Fifth International, Peter Main looked at the changes that have occurred in the Chinese economy as capitalism was reintroduced. In this companion piece he outlines the arguments about the scale of growth in China's economy*

As the US economy moves into recession, Peter Main looks at the possible repercussions on China, a country that has become an icon of globalisation's dynamism in recent years. Rather than coming to the rescue of world capitalism, he argues that the coming year will see China face slackening export markets at a time when its domestic cycle is moving towards its peak.

The prospect of a recession in the USA has focused attention on the likely consequences for the rest of the world. As the world's biggest national economy, the US is often described as the "locomotive of the world economy" but nobody is in any doubt that, in recent years, this engine has been increasingly reliant on China for maintaining its speed. For years, the pundits of globalisation have pointed to the growing interdependence of the US and Chinese economies as a win-win proof of capitalism's efficiency and dynamism. It was taken as tangible evidence that global capitalism could spread social and economic benefits to the south and east. Put briefly, cheap labour in China supplied cheap consumer goods to the US. This, together with Chinese purchases of US Treasury bonds, contributed to a powerful deflationary pressure that allowed interest rates in the US to be kept low. Cheap credit encouraged expenditure that, in turn, kept the US economy growing. Internationally, China's booming industrial economy created demand for energy, raw materials and food. Thus, China has become an icon in recent years of global capitalism's dynamism and its capacity to spread.

Leaving aside for a moment the bourgeois ideological aspects of this outline, the economic analysis as a whole is in itself problematic. It is accurate as description of the dynamics of the industrial cycle that began in China at the turn of the century and in the US in 2001, but becomes erroneous in its assumption

that this apparently virtuous spiral could maintain its stability and momentum indefinitely - or, at least as long as China's countryside was a reservoir of cheap labour. Now that the credit crunch has brought growth rates in the US juddering to a halt, attention is turning to whether China is now a big enough economy to pull along the rest of the world, even without constantly expanding exports to the US. Those that believe this is now possible argue that China has "decoupled" from the US and can power ahead on the basis, primarily, of its domestic development.

This argument cannot be dismissed out of hand. Although production for the export market has undoubtedly been an important factor in China's economic development, it has never been dominant. After, accession to the World Trade Organisation and the resulting boom, it accounts for some 40 per cent of GDP, and, in recent years, growth in domestic demand has contributed more to GDP growth.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the US is no longer the number one destination for China's exports, accounting for 21 per cent as against the EU's 23 per cent. With a population of 1.35 billion, more than 100 cities with populations of more than 500,000, a working class of perhaps 350 million and annual investment in fixed assets, broadly speaking infrastructure and production facilities, equivalent to more than 45 per cent of GDP<sup>2</sup>, it is clear that a decline in US imports would by no means automatically result in the wheels of Chinese industry grinding to a halt.

Nonetheless, this should not be taken to mean that a US recession would have no impact on China at all. Certainly, the dramatic falls on stock markets in Shanghai, Shenzhen and Hong Kong, when it became clear in mid-January that major financial institutions such as Merrill Lynch were now convinced not only that the US faced a recession but was

already in one, suggest that the main players in those markets are fearful of the consequences. Internationally, the World Bank has calculated that China's GDP growth could be reduced by up 0.5 per cent for every 1 per cent reduction in US consumer spending.<sup>3</sup> That may not seem too significant against a background of 11.4 per cent GDP growth in the last year but it would mean that a drop of 10 per cent in US consumer spending would mean virtually halving China's recent growth rates - a sizeable shock to any economy.

Moreover, trade in consumer goods is by no means the full extent of China's engagement with the world market. In recent years, capital goods have become an increasingly important component of exports and so a downturn in industrial investment in the US would increase the impact on China's production. In addition, China's own financial institutions are not immune to the effects of the subprime crisis because of their own investments in the US. Equally, a recession in the US could be expected to have some impact on the EU economy and a consequent reduction in China's exports in that direction. Lastly, it should not be forgotten that China's export trade is supported by an import trade that is almost as big and draws in raw materials, semi-finished goods, energy and food from around the world. Any contraction in China's exports, therefore, would have an immediate impact on many other countries' economies.

On balance, then, the evidence does not support the "decoupling thesis" if that is understood to mean that a US recession would have, at most, only a marginal effect on China's continued economic growth. That, however, does not exhaust the question of the prospects for China in the short to mid term and ignores the dynamics of China's "domestic" economy. Even if the downturn in

**A drop of 10 per cent in US consumer spending would mean virtually halving China's recent growth rates - a sizeable shock to any economy**

the export trade does knock several percentage points off GDP growth, could that be offset by continued expansion of the domestic market? Could that be enough to allow China to take over as the world's economic locomotive?

Just the fact that such a question can now be posed shows the transformation that has certainly taken place in China in the last three decades. Given that last year the International Monetary Fund estimated that total Chinese GDP, calculated on the basis of purchasing power parity (PPP), was the equivalent of \$11.6 trillion while the US economy was \$13.5 trillion, it might not seem unreasonable to suggest that China was on the brink of overtaking the US anyway, even without a recession. Such an argument, however, is an exaggeration, and one that serves the ideological interests of the supporters of globalisation.

If we leave aside the inherent limitations of GDP as a measure of the productive capacity of the economy<sup>4</sup> then a case can be made for using PPP in order to compare the GDP's of countries which have very different levels of development. Obviously, the effect of using purchasing power parities depends on the multiplier used to convert the GDP figure from one based on exchange rates. With regard to China, the most widely used converter, and the one used by the IMF in the calculation referred to above, has been the one applied by the World Bank: a ratio of 4.5 times the GDP estimated at market exchange rates. However, in December, 2007, on the basis of the International Comparison Project's (ICP) more rigorous calculation of prices and incomes in China, the World Bank reduced this multiplier by almost 50 per cent to 2.3 and on this basis China's GDP for 2005, which was \$2.2438 trillion at the official exchange rate, was recalculated as \$5.3332 trillion, rather than the \$8.88 trillion previously estimated.

Using the new multiplier, the estimated figures for 2007 are \$7.04 trillion, rather than \$11.6 trillion, not much more than 50 per cent the size of the US economy which, in the same series, is some \$13.5 trillion. In global terms, China is now reckoned to represent 9.7 per cent of world GDP, rather than 14.5 per cent.<sup>5</sup> However, because such a large proportion of China's economy is geared to exports, which are obviously traded at world market prices, even this calculation is still likely to over-estimate the size of the economy. In fact, the World Bank's

previous multiplier had long been put in question by research carried out in 1999 by China's official statistics office and the OECD. This suggested a multiplier of approximately 2, very similar to the ICP's final figure of 2.3.<sup>6</sup> At the time, however, most Western economists, both academic and official, were keen to talk up the size of the Chinese economy. Even now, it should be borne in mind that the GDP figure itself is still based on Chinese government statistics rather than on the sampling and survey techniques more generally used elsewhere.

Clearly, this much reduced estimation of the comparative size of the Chinese economy immediately undermines the idea that it is close to overtaking the US in overall size or that it could play the same "locomotive" role within the global economy. The purchasing power parity figures were also used in the calculation of one of the most famous statistics used to show how beneficial capitalist restoration in China has been - the raising of 200 million peasants out of poverty. The figure itself is calculated on the basis of Chinese government statistics that show that in 1978 250 million people lived below "the poverty line" but by 2003 this had been reduced to 29 million. The "poverty line" was defined as the equivalent of 67 US cents, using the World Bank's 4.5 multiplier of actual income in yuan.<sup>7</sup>

There are two points to be made about this; in 1978, poverty and hunger were widespread in China, indeed, it was that poverty that provided the impetus for the peasants of Anhui province to break out of the commune system and re-establish family farming in 1977. This immediately led to an increase in output and was probably the major influence on Deng Xiaoping when he introduced "reforms" of agriculture the following year. Nonetheless, it is difficult to see how a criterion of poverty based on money income can be applied retrospectively to a population for whom money transactions were not the norm. Certainly, the money income of peasants at that time was extremely low but they did not have to pay for a lot of things that are now commodities.

Secondly, and more importantly, the Chinese government's definition of poverty differs from the widely used UN and World Bank definition, which is a dollar a day. Using the new PPP multiplier and this criterion produces the staggering total of 300 million Chinese living, or at least surviving, below this "inter-

national poverty line", that is to say, in absolute poverty. According to the World Bank, this would be an over-estimation because the poor are concentrated in the countryside where lower prices prevail and in their first commentary on the new figures they estimate that, in 2004, the figure would have been approximately 15 per cent of the population, accounting for some 195 million people.<sup>8</sup>

The development of Chinese capitalism has not only been a major source of material benefit for the imperialist powers but also an ideological one. Characteristically, restoration is presented as having ensured decades of "steady growth" - the 2005 OECD report on China, for example, spoke of "9.5 per cent per year for the last 20 years". Explicitly or not, this growth in the Chinese economy is compared to a country which "communism" had reduced to abject poverty and rendered an international pariah. Certainly, there is no question that there has been enormous economic development in China and integration into the world market has been an important contributor to that growth - proof, if more were needed, of the complete bankruptcy of the strategy of building "socialism in one country". Nonetheless, in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the content of that growth and its social and political consequences, it is necessary to get beneath the ideological form in which it is customarily presented. The fact that we have no alternative data cannot be wished away but makes it all the more important to bear in mind both their institutional and their ideological origins.

With regard to understanding growth rates in China, expressed as percentage GDP growth, it is particularly important to remember this for two related reasons. Firstly, the starting point for such statistical series, China before the reforms of 1978, cannot itself be measured in such terms, comparable figures just do not exist, even though economists have tried to compute equivalents. It follows that, especially for the early years of the "reform" period, the calculation of growth as a percentage of the previous "size" of the economy will be unreliable. Secondly, even without any actual development, GDP figures would increase over the period because the restoration of capitalism has meant that whole parts of the economy, which were previously either allocated according to bureaucratic planning or simply did not exist, have now been "marketised" and so have to be paid

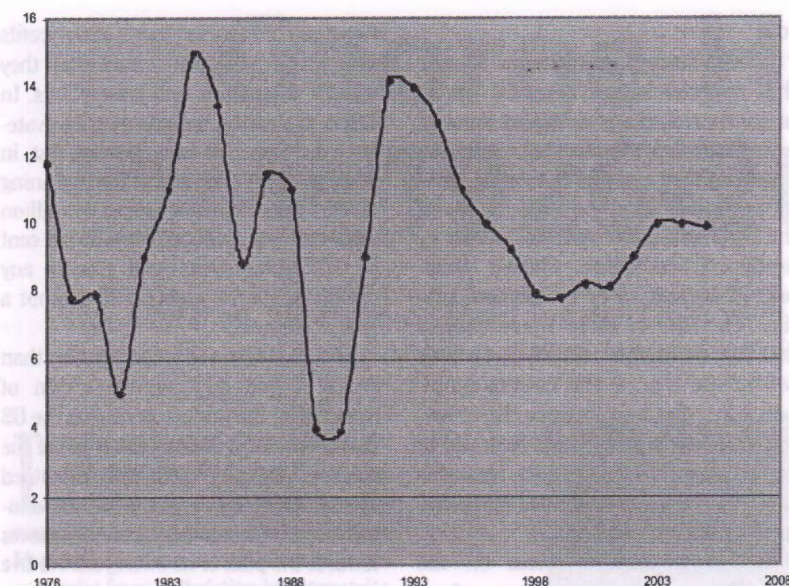


Figure 1: GDP 1978 – 2005, based on official statistics (Derived from Naughton p.144)

for. Thus, in 1978, before the “reforms”, basic health services were provided free to members of communes in the countryside while in the cities the “iron rice bowl” guaranteed housing, health, social services and education, albeit at an equally basic level, to the population. Today, all health services are cash-based and all urban housing was privatised between 1995 and 1998. In addition, to the impact on GDP of including these factors, we also have to reckon with the resulting explosion of accountants, lawyers and estate agents whose activities also add to GDP.

A further consideration is that China’s estimated population of 1.35 billion is believed to grow at the rate of 1.07 per cent per year<sup>10</sup> and just to cater for this steady increase in population it has been calculated that GDP has to grow by 6.5 per cent per year. In rough and ready terms, therefore, growth in GDP per capita has to be calculated by subtracting that figure from the “headline” figures. With regard to those headline figures, the most common figure is that quoted in the OECD survey, 9.5 per cent annual growth. Such figures give the impression of steady expansion but this is highly misleading; in 1984, according to official statistics, GDP growth approached 15 per cent while in 1989 and 1990 it was below 4 per cent. Two years later it was back up above 14 per cent before declining steadily to a little below 8 per cent in 1999.<sup>11</sup> In other words, as Figure 1 shows in graphical form, the Chinese economy exhibits quite marked variations in growth rate

and the restoration of capitalism has by no means ushered in a period of steady and balanced development. On the contrary, we can now expect China to be subject to the industrial cycle of booms and slumps that are characteristic of all capitalist economies.

Above and beyond those considerations, we also have to question the validity of the figures themselves. In other countries, formally independent institutions calculate the statistics using sampling and survey techniques. In China, however, figures are still compiled by the ministries responsible for different sectors, a system inherited from the degen-

erate workers’ state. Jonathan Story quotes the Asian Development Bank as routinely deducting two points from China’s official growth rates.<sup>12</sup> In a symposium organised by China Economic Review in December 2001, Thomas Rawski presented a range of contradictory data culled from Chinese statistics for the years 1997 and 1998 to illustrate their unreliability and the “intentional falsification of economic performance indicators”.<sup>14</sup> One set of figures illustrates the point, particularly if one remembers that these were the years of the East Asia crash when it was extremely important to China to maintain the appearance of economic stability and continued progress. Between 1997 and 2000, GDP reportedly grew by 24.7 per cent, yet energy consumption, which normally moves roughly in parallel with GDP, declined by 12.8 per cent.

The manifest unreliability of China’s official statistics is a serious problem for international capital. Potential investors need to know, at least within their own terms, what is actually happening and, as China has opened up, it has become increasingly possible for researchers to compile their own statistical series. One example of this is the Goldman Sachs “China Activity” (GSCA) series upon which figure 2 is based. Interestingly, a comparison between this series and the official figures for growth in the late 1990s, 4–5 per cent for GSCA, 8 per cent officially, suggests that the Asian Development Bank was overoptimistic as

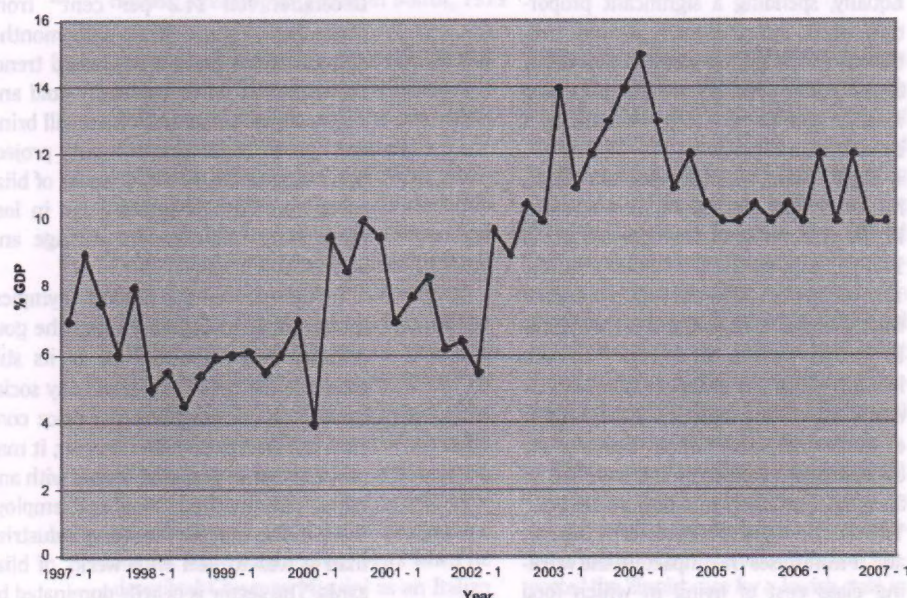


Figure 2: GDP 1997 – 2006, Derived from Goldman Sachs’ figures, (GS Global Economics Paper, 147, Oct 06)

to just how serious the situation then was. Equally, the GSCA figures for 2006 point to higher growth rates than the official account, at a time when Beijing was increasingly concerned that the economy was over-heating.

Indeed, for several years, slowing down the rate of growth of the economy has been a major priority for Beijing. Uncontrolled growth threatens to bring in its wake not only inflation and a worsening of the imbalance between the coastal provinces and the interior but also protectionist measures in China's main trade partners, especially in the US presidential election year. As a result, since 2005 the yuan, which was previously effectively tied to the dollar, has been allowed to appreciate by some 12 per cent. In addition, at the end of 2007, various incentives to the export trade, such as tax breaks, were removed and some restrictions were introduced, for example, on goods whose production requires high energy consumption. Internally, in an attempt to curb bank lending, the ratio of bank reserves to lending has been raised.

Despite such measures, however, the trade surplus in 2007 grew by 47.7 per cent to \$262.2 billion while GDP growth for the year is estimated at 11.2 per cent.<sup>16</sup> As a result, foreign exchange reserves, which were already the largest in the world, rose still further to \$1.53 trillion. This enormous pool of capital is itself a source of instability since. To the extent that it is released, or "leaks", into the domestic economy, it fuels inflation. Equally, spending a significant proportion of it internationally would contribute to the falling value of the dollar and, thereby, devalue both the remaining reserves and China's dollar-denominated investments abroad.

Eight years into the current cycle, however, there are signs that it is reaching its peak. An annualised growth rate of 11.4 per cent for 2007 is higher than the 11.1 per cent of 2006 but masks a decline from 11.9 per cent in the second quarter to 11.2 per cent in the fourth.<sup>17</sup> Growth has forced up the price of imported raw materials, oil and food and these, together with increased urban demand for domestically produced food, have led to an official inflation rate of 6.5 per cent.<sup>18</sup> This is the highest figure for a decade, and it minimises the impact on the working class cost of living in which food prices, some of which have risen by as much as 50 per cent, play a very large

role.

In early January, in an attempt to bring this potential source of social unrest under control, the government imposed price controls on a range of necessities including food and fuel but, while these measures may steady prices in the shops, the costs will either have to be met by producers, including China's hard-pressed farmers, or by government subsidy. The first of these would depress domestic demand even further at a time when there is an urgent need to stimulate it in order to re-balance the economy, while the second would both add to inflation and drain away state resources when they will also be needed for investment in the interior.

The rapid rise in prices on the Shanghai and Shenzhen stock exchanges, which have seen 400 per cent<sup>19</sup> increases in less than two years, may in part be driven by inexperienced, small-scale investors but the prospect of easy profits which attracted them suggests that the rates of return on investment in productive capacity are on the wane. Certainly, the dramatic volatility seen throughout 2007 is a characteristic indicator of the nervousness in the markets usually seen as the cycle reaches its peak. As a result of both international and domestic pressures, then, the prospect for the coming year is one of increasing economic instability. As we have seen, the growth rate slowed in the final quarter and this can be traced to a decline in exports; the surplus on trade in December fell 14.2 per cent<sup>20</sup> from November's figure. While one month's figures cannot prove a downward trend, the impact of an unexpectedly cold and snowy winter in Central China will bring the figures down further - early projections suggest the first two weeks of blizzards have cost 54 billion yuan in lost production, infrastructure damage and agricultural losses.

In the year of the Beijing Olympics, there cannot be any doubt that the government will make full use of its still extensive controls to try avoid any social unrest - as the imposition of price controls has already shown. However, it may prove no better prepared to deal with any major cuts in production and employment in the export-processing industries than it was to deal with weeks of blizzards. The sector is heavily dominated by companies based in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan and even those based in Hong

Kong can be expected to put their profits before their patriotism - if sales fall they will lay off workers and close plants. In China as a whole, the number of privately owned firms has been growing fast, in 2006 by 15 per cent, and at the beginning of 2007 they employed almost 64 million workers<sup>21</sup> and produced some 65 per cent of GDP. After such rapid growth, any downturn can be expected to prompt a rash of closures.

The coming year, then, rather than seeing China take up the strain of dynamising the world economy as the US enters recession, is more likely to see the country grappling with the combined effects of a slowdown in the world economy just as the domestic economy moves towards the peak of its own cycle. We live in interesting times.

For a detailed exposition of the restoration of capitalism in China, see Main, P., 'From Mao to the Market', Fifth International, vol. 2, no. 4, autumn 2007. Available from [shop.fifthinternational.org](http://shop.fifthinternational.org)

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Economist, 24 October, 2007
- 2 *ibid*
- 3 Figures from World Bank Quarterly Update, Beijing November 2008, p.6
- 4 Bourgeois economics regards a national economy as essentially an exchange mechanism, a market upon which goods and services are traded, not a system of production of values. Consequently, the "size" of an economy is measured by totalling up the prices of all end goods and services, giving appropriate "weightings" to different sectors.
- 5 Figures from 2005 International Comparison Program Preliminary Results, 17 December 2007, World Bank
- 6 See OECD Economic Surveys: China, Paris 2005, p.71
- 7 *ibid*
- 8 Figures derived from China Quarterly Update, World Bank, Beijing, February 2008, p.22
- 9 OECD Economic Surveys: China, Paris, 2005 p.12
- 10 Official census figures for 2000
- 11 Figures from CEIC, quoted by Lo, Phantom of the China Economic Threat, Basingstoke 2006, p.11
- 12 Figures derived from B Naughton, The Chinese Economy, Cambridge, MA 2007, p.144
- 13 J.Story, China, the race to the market, Edinburgh, 2003 p.62
- 14 Thomas Rawski, What's happening to China's GDP Statistics? prepared for China Economic Review 12, December 2001, p.3
- 15 See Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper 147, October 2006
- 16 Figures from General Administration of Customs, quoted in Asian Times Online, Jan 15, 2008
- 17 See China Quarterly Update, World Bank, Beijing, February 2008, p.2
- 18 *ibid*, p.4
- 19 According to The Economist, 24 October 2007
- 20 Asian Times Online, *op cit*
- 21 Figures from Speaking Out, China Labour Bulletin Research Report 5 [www.clb.org.hk](http://www.clb.org.hk) Dec 2007, p5

# George Habash

## 1926-2008

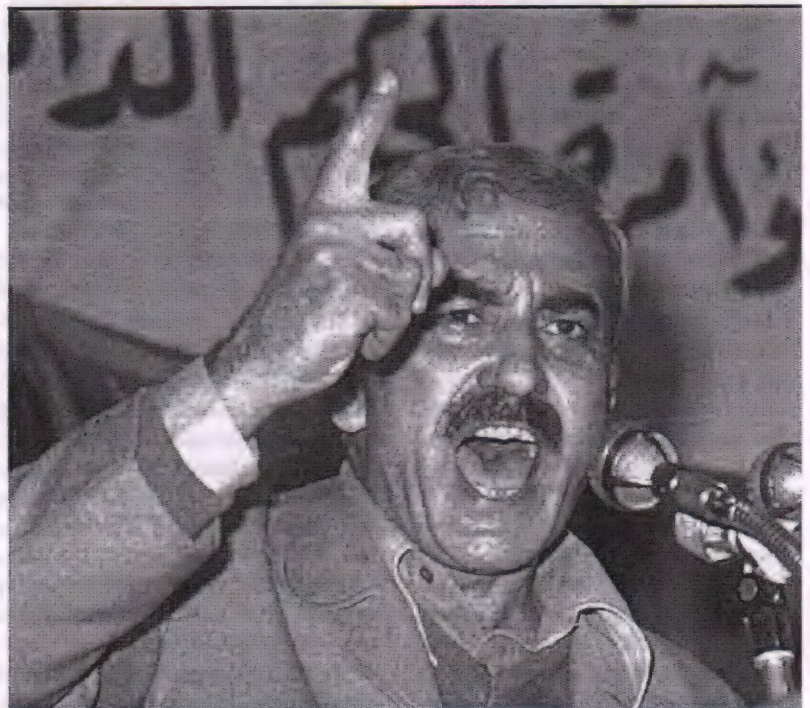
*The leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine died in January 2008. Marcus Halaby looks at his political legacy and the struggle for Palestinian liberation*

I first became aware of the Doctor as a small child. Although not Palestinian myself, I grew up regarding him, in a roundabout way, as one of “our” leaders. Here was someone – an Arab patriot and secularist from a Christian background, a highly-educated man, and a self-declared Marxist and supporter of the oppressed, an opponent of Zionism and Western imperialism, and a modernist opponent of the Arab regimes – to whom I could point without any embarrassment and say: “he is one of ours”.

Born to a well-off merchant family in Lydda during Britain’s colonial rule of Palestine, Habash was a medical student at the American University of Beirut at the time of the 1948 Partition. He returned to his home town during the war that followed in time to witness the Arab population being driven at gun-point, Nazi-style, to the Jordanian lines at Hebron, on the orders of the future Nobel Peace Prize winner Yitzhak Rabin, an event during which his sister died of typhoid.

Returning to Beirut to complete his medical studies, he and his close friend Wadie Haddad tried to formulate a response to the “Nakba”, or catastrophe that had befallen their people. Drawing on the ideas of the Syrian radical Arab nationalist history professor Constantin Zureiq, they formed a group known as the Brotherhood of Vengeance, which advocated the overthrow of the Arab regimes they held responsible for the loss of Palestine.

Arab disunity – the division of the Arab nation into artificial and unviable entities by British and French colonialism – was held to be the cause of the defeat, and “Arab unity” the solution. Because this disunity was itself only a symptom of the backwardness of Arab societies in the face of a modernised capitalist West, the revolution they advocated would also require



Habash speaking at a rally in Beirut, 1979

the removal of the dominant semi-feudal and religious elites, given an artificial lease of life by colonialism, and the promotion of secularism and social progress.

Despite this apparent radicalism, however, their initial outlook was decidedly not socialist. Zureiq’s original vision had been one of developing a nationalist intellectual elite to promote this revolution – arguing that the struggle to educate the masses was more important than the seizure of power by any party. It was an outlook that implicitly rejected class struggle in favour of a “popular” struggle in which class distinctions were blurred. It was a revolutionary-democratic programme, even a “patriotic” programme (in the sense used by Karl Marx when he described Giuseppe Mazzini as an Italian patriot), but it was not a communist programme.

Habash abandoned early efforts to unite with the Syrian Michel Aflaq’s Ba’ath Socialist Party (later the ruling party of Syria and Iraq under the Assads and Saddam), when he realised that liberating Palestine did not rank highly on the Ba’athist agenda. Towards the official Communist parties, Habash’s group displayed an open hostility, competing with the Lebanese Anton Sa’adeh’s Syrian Social Nationalist Party (a secular nationalist movement that derived some of its inspiration and symbols from Hitler’s Germany) in the intensity of its anti-communism.

This apparent paradox is not so difficult to explain. Stalin’s Russia, sensing an opportunity to supplant British imperialism’s influence in the Arab world, had supported the Zionist case for a Jewish state in Palestine, casting its vote in the United Nations in favour of Partition in 1947. The

Arab Communist parties loyally followed the ensuing orders from Moscow to defend this decision, while Palestine's Communist Party – the only sizeable political organisation in the country with both Jews and Arabs in its ranks – partitioned itself into "Israeli" and "Jordanian" organisations. Stalin's Czechoslovak satellite later supplied the Zionist state with arms at a key turning-point in the war.

Stalinism's complicity in the "original sin" of Zionism cost the Arab Communist parties – and the Arab working-class movement – dearly, setting them back for a whole period. Only Iraq's Communist Party, with its solid mass base, was able to emerge from the aftermath of the Nakba relatively unscathed. Elsewhere, and in Habash's base in Lebanon in particular, the loyalty of the official Communist parties to the twists and turns of Moscow's latest diplomatic manoeuvre meant that they were frequently outflanked on the left by radical nationalists like Zureiq and Aflaq on national and democratic questions. Their often narrow focus on economic and trade union questions, combined with a generally cautious and reformist approach meant that they were often to the right of the nationalists on questions of social justice as well.

Following his graduation as first in his class, Habash, together with Haddad, went on to create a free children's clinic in the Jordanian capital Amman. As a paediatrician, the young doctor would have been deeply aware of the common medical problems of the Palestinian children of the camps – chiefly malnutrition and preventable disease – and their social causes – the denial to their refugee parents of economic opportunities or the right to make a living – stemming, in turn, from an identifiable political fact – the denial of their right to a homeland. Simply to work in this environment, ignoring the lure of a more profitable medical career abroad, was a political act.

This, of course, was the Golden Age of anti-colonial struggles, against the systematic violence of the Western imperialist metropolises towards their subjugated peoples, which saw the emergence of the ideas of such figures as Franz Fanon, Régis Debray and Che Guevara. Habash was one of, and one with, this generation. He founded the Harakat al-Qawmiyyin al-Arab (Arab Nationalist Movement – ANM) with Haddad and Hani al-Hindi in this period, during which Gamal Nasser came to power in a

revolution that swept away the remnants of Egypt's pro-British monarchy.

Nasser subsequently acquired an immense popularity, especially after his defiance of Britain, France and Israel over the 1956 Suez crisis. Given their ideological outlook it is understandable, although not completely excusable, that the ANM became the arm of Nasser in the Arab world, seeing his regime as the embodiment of the "Arab revolution" that they advocated, and looking forward to seeing Egypt acquire a position of strength from which it could wage a successful war to regain Palestine.

Habash fled Jordan for Syria after being implicated in a coup attempt by pro-Nasser military officers in 1957, and remained there during the period 1958 to 1961 when Nasser's rule extended to Syria under the short-lived "United Arab Republic".

In the meantime, other forces were at work amongst the Palestinians. A group around Yasser Arafat based in Kuwait, tiring of Nasser's inaction and opposed to any notion of an "Arab revolution", founded what was to become the Al-Fatah movement, and began to organise guerrilla raids into Israel from the Jordanian-ruled West Bank in 1965. Partly in response to this, Habash reorganised the Palestinian members of the ANM into a "regional command". Fatah primarily saw the liberation of the Palestinians coming through the Palestinians themselves, though supported financially and materially by the other Arab leaders, whose overthrow they could therefore hardly argue for.

### THE PFLP

The June 1967 war – which saw Israel's swift and total defeat of all the front-line Arab states in the space of six days – sent Habash's schema of a conventional war spearheaded by a Nasserist Egypt crashing to the ground. The Palestinian regional command of the ANM effectively fused with several other Palestinians organisations, such as the Abtal al-Awda, (Heroes of Return) and was re-launched as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

At its founding conference in 1967 it passed a series of resolutions and documents which began to mark the process of forming them as a socialist orientated cadre party (adopting Leninist democratic centralism) and with a clear concept of revolutionary armed struggle. They wrote

"The only language that the enemy understands is the language of revolutionary violence."

Signalling that they wanted a broad movement which was not only limited to guerrilla fighters they said: "The crossfire of armed struggle is not known to have limits and the armed resistance should not be confined to the militants, but also embrace all parts and sectors of the Palestinian resistance against the enemy at every level, dealing with the enemy militarily, but also a total boycott of all economic, civil and political institutions of the enemy and a rejection of all ties." Today the principle of boycotts and workers sanctions against apartheid regimes such as Israel has been given a new lease of life with the campaign to boycott Israeli academic institutions, part of a process of fighting to end Israeli legitimacy on a world scale.

Flying the flag of their origins in pan-Arabism, their progressive distinction from Fatah's programme was that they made a direct link between the Palestinian struggle and all those struggling against oppression across the Arab world. "In our response to the Zionist alliance and colonialism, we must make the organic link between the struggle of the masses of the Arab people, facing the same risks and the same schemes, and therefore the work of the Palestinian armed struggle determines the position of the Arabs who stand by the struggle, against those who stand against it."

In 1969 they published their strategy for liberation document which elaborated on this theme. "We may say that the fate of the Palestinian revolution and the armed struggle – commando action – now being carried out by the Palestinian people depends on the extent of their coalescence with a revolutionary strategy which aims at mobilising the forces of revolution in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and the rest of the Arab countries". The PFLP quickly grew to become the second most powerful faction in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), behind Arafat's Fatah. One aspect of their tactics that did mark them out compared to other Palestinian groups was their extravagant and elaborate hijackings of planes that drew international attention.

It is for this period – of spectacular "international actions" and so forth – that he is most well-known in the West, pro-



Poster celebrating 30 years of the PFLP

viding the basis for the claims by his detractors that he was a "Godfather of terrorism" – as if Palestinian resistance, no matter if it is misguided, were not a justified response to US, Israeli and Arab state terrorism. The hijacking of three planes to Dawson's Field in Jordan in 1970, where they were blown up (minus passengers) before the world's TV cameras, proved to be the 9/11 of its day.

A common criticism from the left is that he tried to out-Fatah Fatah, and placed a naïve faith in the ability of these spectacular actions to further the struggle for liberation. He himself always justified the "external operations" by referring to the necessity to remind the world of the Palestinians' existence, and their suffering.

In fact, it seems more likely that he merely gave a free hand to Wadie Haddad, who had much less patience for the "mass work" that Habash advocated, in order to keep his organisation together at a time when the Palestinian masses themselves were clamouring to be allowed to fight Israel. He abandoned this tactic as soon as it had served its limited purpose, and expelled his lifelong friend Haddad when he tried to continue the "external operations" without authorisation.

The contradictions lodged within the situation of so many Palestinian refugees, armed and organised to fight, effectively a proto-state force through the institutions of the PLO, exploded in 1970. The bulk of the Palestinian fighters were based in Jordan, not just in the refugee camps along the border with the West Bank but also in the capital Amman, and other cities, and effectively ruled those areas with their own militias.

Sensing a threat to its authority and its existence, and not convinced by Arafat's insistence that he was fighting solely for a Palestinian state, the Jordanian Hashemite monarchy moved to disarm the Palestinian guerrillas. The Dawson's Field hijacking gave King Hussein the pretext to launch his "Black September" massacres of the Palestinians, while Nasser's Egypt and Ba'athist Syria looked on, offering only mediation and verbal assistance. After the defeat in Jordan, the PFLP, like the other Palestinian movements, continued the guerrilla struggle against Israel from the much less welcoming terrain of Lebanon, and later supported the Lebanese National Movement's 1975 rebellion against sectarian Maronite rule.

It was in the period after Black September that the PFLP – and Habash – finally took on the form in which they are known today, redefining themselves as a properly "Marxist-Leninist" movement, although it is difficult to say how thorough Habash's own assimilation of Marxism was. The external evidence suggests that it was adopted under pressure from the Maoist-inspired splitters led by Nayef Hawatmeh who formed the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), a group that would later advocate the two-state solution and make its peace with the post-Oslo order.

Even so, key PFLP militants like party spokesman Ghassan Kanafani (a popular novelist with a stature easily comparable to Israel's Amos Oz or England's George Orwell, murdered by Israel in an explosion that also killed his 14 year old niece) had been quite unapologetically Marxist in their outlook for some time. This turn was also accompanied by an orientation towards the global left (in stark contrast to Fatah, whose leader preferred to be seen shaking the hands of Western politicians from respectable bourgeois parties), and to the organised working class. PFLP militants on the ground in the territories occupied in 1967 built trade union organisations, women's organisations and self-help groups or co-operatives, and would later play a key role in the 1987 Intifada.

At the same time, the PFLP maintained the separation of the revolutionary-democratic programme from the communist programme that had been a hallmark of the ANM. In effect, this meant adopting the politics of an older generation of Arab Communist parties (first democracy, secularism and national

independence, and the struggle for socialism later on), without the stigma of their previous support for the Partition. While Habash's unconventionally non-Stalinist past gave him a healthy degree of scepticism towards the Soviet bureaucracy's drive to hegemonise anti-colonial struggles, his movement would come to share the dependence of the pro-Soviet left worldwide on their sponsor in Moscow, and the disorientation produced by its own games of chess with the Western imperialist powers.

The PFLP, despite looking to the Arab masses as part of the revolutionary struggle to liberate the Palestinians, and seeing it indissolubly linked up with the struggle against their own undemocratic regime was unable to develop a meaningful transitional programme, one which would plot a course from the democratic struggle to a fight for working class power – the strategy of permanent revolution. They wrote:

"In the light of Israel's occupation of Sinai and the Golan Heights its very existence and its persistence as a base from which imperialism prepares to attack any move towards Arab liberation – in the light of this concrete picture – the stage which the Arab people are now traversing is that of national liberation, of democratic national revolution, *notwithstanding the class and economic changes which have taken place in Egypt, Syria, Algeria and Iraq in the direction of socialist transformation*[our emphasis. –FI]"

The belief that only a democratic revolution was on the cards for the Arab workers and middle classes was a self-limiting perspective for the working class across the region, effectively arguing for a period of stable bourgeois democracy before a socialist revolution could take place. This is despite the fact that in the same paragraph they acknowledge that even bourgeois regimes in four Middle Eastern countries have carried out nationalisations of industry in order to combat world imperialist control of their own economies.

## DECLINE OF THE PFLP

The outbreak of civil war in Lebanon in 1975 (which lasted for another 15 years), followed by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, saw the end of the "armed struggle" as a mass phenomenon, and the turn to diplomacy by the PLO under Arafat, that culminated in the great Oslo betrayal in 1993. While Habash,



quite rightly, tried to resist the drive to a negotiated sell-out, his allies in the Iraqi-based "Rejectionist Front" were, with the exception of the DFLP, creations or mercenaries of the so-called "progressive" Arab regimes (Syria, Iraq and Libya), adding their influence to the hazards that the PFLP had to navigate. On later occasions, Habash's periodic attempts to reconcile with Arafat's PLO (in the interests of "Palestinian unity") saw the PFLP provide Arafat with a left cover for his own manoeuvres.

Ironically, the one great event that ought to have vindicated Habash's revolutionary outlook and focus on mass work – the great Palestinian uprising from 1987 to 1992 – instead saw the movement's decline and the rise of political Islam, accompanied as it was by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decimation of Saddam's Iraq in George H Bush's "Operation Desert Storm".

The Oslo accords – which Habash vehemently opposed – ushered in a new period, in which Israel intensified its expansion of illegal Jewish settlements in the 1967 territories, safe in the knowledge that no Arab state would lift a finger to stop it, and that the services of Arafat, the hegemonic leader of Palestinian nationalism, had been bought.

The revival of the Palestinian struggle, marked by the outbreak of the "Al-Aqsa Intifada" in September 2000, saw PFLP militants playing a new role, with their new leader Abu Ali Mustafa assassinated by rockets fired from an Israeli helicopter at his office in Ramallah in August 2001. But the intervening years of decline had clearly taken their toll on the movement.

They must have taken their toll on the

Doctor as well. Uniquely for a leader of his status, he stepped down voluntarily from the leadership of the PFLP in 2000, the same year as the beginning of the second Palestinian uprising. In later years, he would give the impression that he was resigned to the idea that "we the left, have failed", leaving it to a future generation to pick up where he left off. It is certainly the case that the two great objectives that he stood for historically – Arab unity and Palestinian liberation – seem further away today from being accomplished than they were at any time before.

It is difficult to blame the man as an individual for this. His movement, after all, was not without some concrete political achievements – the Yemeni branch of his ANM led a successful struggle against British colonial rule, while Kuwait, one of the most reactionary and oppressive monarchies in the region whose existence the United States fought a war to preserve, owes its elected parliament to the willingness to go to prison and exile of the Kuwaiti members. Most importantly of all, he kept the flame of Arab and Palestinian defiance alive in the face of the arch betrayals of the 1993 Oslo accords.

Of all the main Palestinian leaders, he was the least interested in the trappings of power, or in the acquisition of influential "friends", for their own sake. He died barely able to support himself, having turned down the offers of well-meaning sympathisers keen to prevent the symbol of the Arab revolution from spending his final years in poverty – as well as the approaches of somewhat less well-meaning reactionaries in power, keen to buy the prestige associated with his name.

Within the movement for Palestinian liberation he easily represented a progressive current as compared with his arch-rival Arafat (not to speak of today's more religiously-inspired figures), not because he stressed the primacy of the "Arab nation" over its intended constituent parts, but because this set of priorities indicated an understanding that the liberation of Palestine could not be separated from revolutionary social and political change in the Arab world – that the Arab regimes were part of the problem, not the solution.

Within the Arab nationalist movement, his tradition represented the most democratic variant of pan-Arabism, avoiding the ideological shapelessness of Nasserism or the self-interested and amoral mystifications of Ba'athism, with its commonplace denunciations of recalcitrant Arab minorities, and its chauvinist indifference to non-Arab ones. This is because it represented a living, breathing mass struggle, and not the degeneration of a regime legitimising itself on the ruins of a mass struggle whose failure brought it to power.

Within the Arab left more generally, he, again almost uniquely, resisted the rush to acquire a more reputable status following the collapse of the Soviet experiment, albeit only by remaining in a type of political stasis. It is certainly difficult to imagine Habash, who placed a high premium on the importance of dignity in politics, adopting the behaviour of Iraq's Communist Party, rushing to take its place in America's drive to bring "democracy" through occupation, or Lebanon's Democratic Left, supporting a neo-liberalising, pro-US government in the hope that this will provide a guarantee of Lebanon's independence.

Any future revival of the Arab left will have to deal with the legacy of Al-Hakim, the Doctor – with his mistakes as well as his insights, his compromises with the Arab regimes and periods of defiance of them. But in an age when we are taught that no other world is possible, that the only choice that exists is between standing behind the American juggernaut so as not to be crushed by it, or resigning oneself to a life of struggle and sacrifice in this life with a reward only in the next, we must learn from the positive aspects of the attempts to build a secular, revolutionary organisation, whilst rejecting the mistaken tactics and theories which led to its failure.

# Progress versus Nature? Can marxist theory and class struggle avert environmental catastrophe?

*Must human progress lead to environmental degradation? The writings of classical Marxism have often been accused of identifying progress with the ceaseless march of industry and production, regardless of its environmental consequences.*

*As Luke Cooper shows, this common misconception could not be more wrong. Marxism not only explains the causes of the current ecological crisis, but also shows how working class struggle can overcome it.*

*A harmonious relation with our natural environment and the development we need to fight global poverty is perfectly possible and necessary. But it means overthrowing global capitalism*

In the autumn of 2006 The Independent splashed the headline "Earth's ecological debt crisis" across its front page. Journalist Martin Hickman reported research that showed the rate of human over-consumption of farming land, forests, fish, air and energy resources had reached some 23 per cent. Like an individual living beyond their means and running up credit card debts the aggregated total level of "debt" humanity "owed" to the natural world, meant the damage done to the environment was more than even the most stringent measures could offset.<sup>1</sup>

The damage caused to the eco-system as a result of the burning of fossil fuels, highlighted by so many reports is the most pressing environmental concern. Its effects include melting ice caps, threatening regions below sea level; expanding desertification and the thawing of permafrost in the Arctic tundra; the poisoning of water supplies; plus an increasing number of extreme weather conditions, threatens the lives and homes of millions of people.<sup>2</sup>

Climate change is by no means the only threat to the environment caused by the activity of humans. Some thirteen million hectares of forest are lost every year, particularly tropical rainforests, home to the world's widest range of species. The degradation of marine ecosystems and over-fishing are leading to a collapse in fish stocks.<sup>3</sup>

When they met in Washington in February 2007, they simply agreed not to let the level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere rise beyond between 450 and 550 parts

per million. In 2005, CO<sub>2</sub> levels stood at just 379 parts per million – thus world leaders left room for an astonishing forty five per cent increase!<sup>4</sup> More recently, at the two-week long UN sponsored conference on climate change in Bali, no agreement on binding targets for emissions cuts was reached. Despite this, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown had the audacity to describe the agreement – which was little more than a promise to keep talking on the issue for a further two years – as "historic".<sup>5</sup> These laughable exaggerations aside, the Bali conference provides a very clear illustration of how contradictory environmental degradation has become as a political issue. There is an unprecedented recognition – even in the political establishment and the upper echelons of bourgeois high society – that action needs to be taken immediately on climate change if the projected catastrophic outcomes are to be averted. But rather than take sufficient measures, corporations and governments alike carry on pursuing the same policies as before, only now attached to a misleading pseudo-ecological discourse.

There has never been a more important time, then, to ask what causes modern environmental degradation? A tacit assumption in the ecological discourse now employed by Gordon Brown *et al* is that certain technical fixes and limited state regulation of the market economy will be sufficient to tackle the problem; in short, they maintain that there is nothing ecologically destructive about the market economy *per se*. This should come as no

surprise, given that neoliberal ideology goes as far as claiming that the market is a "natural" phenomenon – with the assumption that society cannot be organised any other way. In doing so, classical liberal theory not only makes the claim that human social relations are inevitably market relations, but also that the market is the only means to manage human interchange with nature. If these assumptions of the profiteers are to be countered, then clearly one has to come to a fundamentally different understanding of the human relation to nature. Against theories of "natural" laws, one should maintain that the relationship between the human species and nature has changed and developed over time. It is only once we understand how this change and development has occurred, and analyse modern capitalism and its anti-ecological imperatives within this context, that we will be able to develop a theory of modern environmental degradation, i.e. one that elucidates the causes of it, can make predictions (and warnings) for future developments, and points to the political strategy needed to tackle the crisis.

Contrary to widespread critics (see box on opposite), a theory of modern environmental degradation can be developed on the basis of the method and approach to ecology taken by Marx and Engels – which has been elucidated and developed recently by the Marxist scholars, Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster. It is important to first summarise this methodology and approach, which has several, inter-connected elements:

- It must be consistently social and materialist
- It must be founded upon a conception that the totality of human-nature interrelations is more than the sum of its parts, i.e it must be *holistic*.
- It must recognise the central role of labour in human interchange with nature
- It must be a dialectical, interpenetrated approach to natural and social history
- It must recognise historic social specifications to the humanity-nature interchange
- It must recognise the role of nature in the production of wealth.

This will allow us to see capitalism in a broader historical perspective of the contradictory and antagonistic development of the human species over time, while also providing an epistemological foun-

## Marx: apologist for ecological destruction?

Theorists and activists in the ecology movement have long tended to the view that Marxism is an intrinsically anti-ecological doctrine. This criticism reflects the failures of the reformist and Stalinist left in the post-war period to take up the environmental issue, despite rising levels of pollution across the globe.

Environmentalists also, quite rightly criticise the industrial programmes of the Soviet Union that were environmentally destructive in the extreme, and undertaken with total disregard for long-term sustainability. The case for Marxism was also not helped by those theorists like, for example, Alfred Schmidt, who argued that environmental degradation was an inevitable consequence of progress. He infamously said that socialism is to benefit "man alone and that there is no doubt that this is to be at the expense of external nature."

Some environmentalists, however, not only bring forward correct criticisms of the failings of these ostensibly Marxist theorists and parties, but also erroneously claimed that their errors were rooted in the classical writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They

argue Marx and Engels were guilty of insisting that there were no natural, material limits for industrial production, but only the social constraints of capitalist property relations. Moreover, Marx is said to have paid insufficient attention to environmental concerns, seeing them, at best, as a separate and secondary consideration to the working class struggle.

As a result, many environmentalists adopt *déclassé* theories that connect core liberal assumptions to a concern for environmental sustainability. Even amongst self-styled "eco-socialists", the criticism of classical Marxism remains.

This criticism is easily rebutted with reference to the writings of Marx and Engels, which are replete with passages showing a deep concern for nature, and the need for environmentally sustainable production. For example, Marx, in his writings on capitalist agriculture, argued that production methods were destroying the lasting sources of soil fertility and, hence, undermining long-term sustainability.

Moreover, as this article shows, the classical Marxist writings are essential in developing a theory of modern environmental degradation.

dation and method of analysis for the specific study of capitalism and nature, which is then undertaken.

We will argue, that Marx provides not only a social critique of capitalism, but also the basis of an ecological one. At the most abstract, general level, he shows that production for profit, which relies on the exploitation of wage labour, alienates humanity from the natural world. At the same time Marx's analysis of capital accumulation reveals that the capitalist engages in a permanent drive to reduce the turnover and circulation time of capital. As we shall see, this concept explains the destructive affects of capital on the organisation of the urban environment, energy production, transportation systems and a great deal more besides. Marx's theory shows that capital strives in the course of its development to smash the laws of space and time themselves. The frenzied pursuit of this impossible goal can have only ruinous consequences for humanity and its natural environment.

## NATURE AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

In understanding the relationship between humanity and nature our starting point should be materialism: the simple proposition that the world is explained according to physical matter and its movements. Marx became a materialist in the 1840s as a student and wrote his doctoral thesis on the classical Greek materialist, Epicurus (341-270 BCE). The materialist premise that Marx shared with Epicurus and also the eighteenth century French materialists was that science and politics should dispense with God and all otherworldly forces as a means to explain the workings of objective reality. As Marx put it, in contrast to idealist philosophy, "which descends from heaven to earth", we must make the "ascent from earth to heaven". Clarifying this, he said, "we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive... we set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of

the life-process."<sup>8</sup>

Hence, for Marx, a radical, materialist and investigatory theory could be used as a weapon to dispel the prevalent myths and assumptions of dominant ideology – the “ideological reflexes and echoes” of the class structure of society. For Marx, it is only with reference to the actual material conditions of life that natural and social science can come to true, verifiable conclusions about reality. Hence, all propositions regarding the world must be tested against the actual, practical experience of human life. This method not only resisted religious claims to truth, but also the development of logically perfect systems of explanation, which did not make reference to the actual, empirically observable world. This, he argued, had to be a starting point for all social science. In the opening pages of *The German Ideology* he summarises this as follows:

“The first premise of human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus, the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relations to the rest of nature... The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.”<sup>9</sup>

Marx’s starting point is, therefore, the physical organisation of individuals and their relationship to the natural environment. The concept of “physical organisation” is instructive, as it includes both the social relations internal to the human societies, and the space, i.e. natural environment, in which these social interchanges take place. For Marx, hence, the social and the material had to be combined within a single, holistic approach. For this reason, Marx criticised those who spoke of “the antitheses in nature and history”... as though these were two separate “things” and “man did not always have before him an historical nature and a natural history.”<sup>11</sup> This antithesis, argued Marx, excluded the relation of man to nature from history.<sup>12</sup>

In making these propositions Marx suggests a methodological approach, that includes both a material and social specification of the human-nature relationship. Human production necessitates interchange with nature and always has a definite social character, i.e. it is undertaken within the context of certain social relationships. At a certain point in

human history, as a result of the development, of a certain social division of labour, these become *class* relationships, i.e. based on the exploitation of the direct producers by a minority of exploiters. This however allowed the development of a greater understanding of nature and the natural forces. But, by allowing society to grow, it created the social forces for the development of new means of production, and therefore a new social division of labour. In short, we cannot understand the changing human-nature relation as it has developed over time, without a consideration of the social, class structures of human society and how their changes have affected human interchange with nature.<sup>13</sup> As Paul Burkett explains, social-ecological analysis must be “consistently social and materialist”; that is, it must treat the “people-nature relation as socially mediated in historically specific ways”, while also analysing the “material content of these forms as constrained by the natural conditions of human production and evolution”.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Burkett argues, we can avoid the twin errors of social constructivism, whereby the material content of social relations is discarded, and a crude mechanical materialism that sees social reality as naturally predetermined.<sup>15</sup>

The latter point was of particular importance to Marx. As is fairly well known, he criticised classical materialism for not integrating a conception of human agency – the “subjective component” – into the materialist system and he acknowledged that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), the great German idealist philosopher, chiefly developed this in his dialectics.<sup>16</sup> This is where the importance of the influence of the anti-deterministic Epicurus on Marx comes in. Epicurus had made the prescient observation that reality consisted of an infinite number of unchanging atoms, with the quality of motion that could combine to form objects.<sup>17</sup> He differed from other classical Greek atomists by arguing that these movements were random and contingent. In making this insight, Epicurus provided a materialist foundation for the view that change, movement and contingency are inherent in the very nature of matter.

In this respect, the Epicurean system conceived of itself as non-reductionist, because, as John Bellamy Foster explains, for Epicurus there can be “no

determinism or essentialism... because such events belonged to the realm of accident (contingency)”.<sup>18</sup> This led Epicurus to a non-deterministic appreciation of the role of the subject, which makes his approach quite different from other mechanistic materialisms, such as, for example, those based on Newtonian science. Furthermore, Epicurus combined a strong emphasis on the sense perceived, empirical world, with recognition of the role of reason in its interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these merits, Marx argued that the problem with the Epicurean system was that the concept of the atom was turned into an abstract, one-sided and ultimately distorting absolute.<sup>20</sup> By seeing reality as simply atomised in this manner, Marx agreed with Hegel that Epicurus had erroneously negated the inter-connected aspect of reality, with its unity and universality.<sup>21</sup> Epicurus was correct only insofar as he argued that matter can, of itself, contain motion and engender change, while also allowing for its evolutionary development. However, the problem remained that it did not admit of consciousness in matter, and therefore it could not explain subjective, *willed* action. Ultimately, for Marx, Epicurus never resolved the contradiction between the subjective, sensuous aspect of his philosophy, and the atom, which, despite its contingency, was elevated to such a principle that it led Epicurus full circle back to a form of reductionism.<sup>22</sup>

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMAN SPECIES THROUGH TIME AND (NATURAL) SPACE

Marx’s doctoral thesis were written in 1841 and allows us to say with confidence that, from his earliest works, he possessed a keen sense of the need to reciprocally connect the objective world with the practical, sensuous activity of agent. This included a concept of natural space and the constraints it placed on human action which has particular importance with regard to political and social change. Materialist thinking about space and time also tended to develop a form of evolutionary theory (something that was also present in the Epicurean outlook<sup>23</sup>) because it challenged explicitly the idea of an original divine intervention. For this reason, it should come as no surprise that there was a powerful

symmetry between Marx and Engels' historical materialist method and the scientific theory of evolution by natural selection developed by Charles Darwin.<sup>14</sup> The basic thesis of Darwin's theory was that a struggle for survival took place within and between species. Individual animals, with certain characteristics, which were best adapted to their environment, would increase in number over the course of millions of years this process led to the development of sub-species, new species and extinction. In 1860, a year after Darwin published *The Origins of Species* Marx commented in a letter to Engels, "Darwin's book on Natural Selection... is the book which contains the basis in natural history for our view."<sup>25</sup>

Marx and Engels not only welcomed Darwin's theory for its atheistic implications, but also because they shared, in their own work, a similar dynamic concept of the development of material space through the course of time – in fact they had been developing these ideas for some twenty years prior to the publication of *Origin of Species*. In *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels summarised their historical materialist approach to natural history. He noted that natural science that still "found its ultimate resort in an impulse from outside that was not to be explained from nature itself" held to a conception of the natural world as "immutable" and "ossified": not something "that had emerged from chaos, something that had developed, that had come into being".<sup>26</sup> He praised the German idealist philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) for arguing, "If the earth were something that had come into being, then its present geological, geographical, and climatic state, and its plants and animals likewise, must be something that had come into being; it must have had a history not only of co-existence in space but also of succession in time."<sup>27</sup> (emphasis added)

In his criticism of those natural scientists, who see the natural world as "immutable" and "ossified", Engels suggests a notion of material unity between the practical activity of human beings and the natural space, in which the activity takes place: a relationship that, as he notes, develops through a succession in time. For Marx and Engels, hence, nature (or space) is seen, in a literal sense, to be an environment for human activity. Humans are not mysterious or divinely created beings, but a species

which is the product of millions of years of evolution – implying a constant relationship to nature that is one of interpenetration and reciprocity. They are formed by this environment and in turn transform it. Importantly, present in early works, such as Marx's doctoral thesis, there is a desire to integrate, dialectically and reciprocally, a notion of agency with the objective, material constraints of external space. Therefore, the interchange between humans and natural space could, for Marx and Engels, only be understood through an analysis of human nature, labour and production.

### THE METABOLIC INTERCHANGE BETWEEN THE HUMAN SPECIES AND NATURE

In the materialist concept of space and time established above, the human species is the product of evolution, and, therefore, part of and continuous with the natural world. However, through this natural historical process, the human species qualitatively distinguishes itself from other animals. As Paul Burkett explains, a social ecological approach to human-nature relations must recognise that:

"Human consciousness and purpose developed in and through society introduce a type of complexity that is not found in the rest of nature. In particular, it must recognise that all ecological values are human and social values, and avoid ascribing a quasi-human subjectivity or purposefulness to nature that it simply does not possess."<sup>28</sup>

For Marx and Engels, in consonance with this, explaining human distinctiveness meant making reference to the historical development of the human species and our essence or being. In *The German Ideology*, written in 1845 but not published in their lifetimes, they argue that human beings "can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation."<sup>29</sup>

Marx and Engels are dismissive of attempts to make reference to the divine or immutable status of human species. Of course, they argue, human sensuousness and consciousness, indeed, all aspects of human civilisation qualitatively distinguish humanity, but these sim-

ply express developments and changes in human society over time. That is, they are symptomatic of the difference, rather than constituting its essence, which is the human capacity to develop production through labour.

This approach is founded upon an evolutionary biology because the "physical organisation" of the human species, rather than any divine impulse, conditions the step at which it begins to produce its means of subsistence. In *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels drew on the work of Darwin to argue that labour must have been a precondition to the development of the human species, insofar as the evolutionary development of the dexterity and flexibility of the hand was a precondition for tool-making and, therefore, the production of the means of subsistence.<sup>30</sup> In short, whereas other organisms gained an evolutionary advantage from a better shape of beak or some such, early hominids gained the advantage of tool making from the mutations that increased manual dexterity.

At the same time, it was necessary to delineate evolutionary biology, as a process spanning millions of years, with the tiny proportion of this time in which human, social history has developed. Engels<sup>31</sup> and Karl Kautsky,<sup>32</sup> for example, were very critical of those thinkers, who vulgarised Darwin's concepts, to deduce from gradual evolution a justification for reformism or using natural selection to justify racism. In countering this thinking, Engels argued that, with the development of the human species, history took on a new, conscious form – indeed, he said, "we enter history" – and this contrasts to natural evolution which is a process of "derivation and gradual evolution" that occurs without the "knowledge or desire" of animals.<sup>33</sup> Concretely, we can point to the accumulation and passing on of knowledge over time as expressing this consciousness in human history, to which Engels referred.

This analysis of the role of labour in the evolutionary development of the human species allowed Marx and Engels to establish a materialist conception of the essence or nature of the human species. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), Marx differentiates the human species from nature by developing a concept of human nature that is based upon labour.

Marx distinguishes between "organic nature", i.e. living human nature, and



Deforestation in Bolivia – driven by capitalism

the “inorganic nature”, i.e. the natural world.<sup>34</sup> He uses the term “species being” of humanity to describe its essence, ontology or intrinsic nature, and argues that this lies in the transformative capacity of humans to restructure external nature through its activity. Whereas, the “animal is immediately identical with its life activity... man makes his life activity the object of his will and of his consciousness”.<sup>35</sup> This means, unlike any other animal, humanity creates an “objective world by his practical activity”<sup>36</sup> and “because of production nature appears as his [i.e. the human species] work and reality”. The object of labour, therefore, is the objectification of man’s species life.<sup>37</sup> Animal life, in contrast, was partial, focused on certain ecosystems and habitats, while human life was increasingly “universal” as all nature became an object of human activity.<sup>38</sup>

The human species, therefore, can only be understood in relation to its external nature or environment, while nature only has consciousness, insofar as this is human consciousness and humans are part of nature. Marx is not making the idealist argument that the objective world only exists insofar as conscious humans observe it. Rather, he is arguing human activity has a conscious, transformative capacity to shape external nature and create what one might call a human environment. The transformative activity of labour and the development of the productive forces over time must therefore have a natural basis:

“The worker can create nothing with-

out nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material on which his labour is manifested, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces.”<sup>39</sup>

Marx continued by arguing that the universality of human activity made nature its “inorganic body”.<sup>40</sup> This is to say that, while nature is not living and organic, like the human species, it is nevertheless “the direct means of human life” and the “material, the object and the instrument of life activity.”<sup>41</sup> While this may seem a curious argument, given that it is obvious that nature includes living and organic things, the point was important for Marx, because he was arguing against romantic notions of nature as a single living entity.<sup>42</sup>

This inter-connectedness between humanity as a natural, biological species and nature had, for Marx, profound ecological implications. He stated: “Man lives on nature – means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in a continuous intercourse if he is not to die.” Here, Marx’s use of the evocative “body” metaphor spells out the degree to which he believes humans are dependent on the natural world for survival. It is often held that Marx abandoned this humanist approach to human-nature interchange, based upon the transformative capacity or species-being of man, in his later work,<sup>43</sup> but, contrary to this, essentially the same method and analysis can be found in *Capital*. When Marx defines the labour process at the general level, i.e. as opposed to its historically specific forms, it is irrevocably linked to

human interchange with nature:

“Labour is first of all a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, heads and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. It is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence.”<sup>44</sup>

Whereas in the *Manuscripts*, Marx uses the body metaphor to describe the complex, interdependent, process linking human beings to nature through labour, here he uses the term, “metabolism”. This term had been developed in 19th century agricultural chemistry to describe the interchange between organisms and their environment.<sup>45</sup> As John Bellamy Foster explains, in applying the term, Marx gave a more “solid, scientific expression” to his earlier analysis and depicted:

“... the complex, dynamic interchange between human beings and nature resulting from human labour. The concept of metabolism, with its attendant notions of material exchanges and regulatory action, allowed him to express the human relation to nature as one that encompassed both ‘nature imposed conditions’ and the capacity of human beings to affect this process.”<sup>46</sup>

The concept of metabolism has assumed an importance in contemporary ecological discourse, and Marx’s transposition of it from debates in chemical science therefore seems prescient. It is unfortunate, then, that in the Lawrence and Wishart English translation of *Capital* the term does not actually feature, and is replaced by the entirely misleading term, “social interchange”.

## NATURE AND WEALTH PRODUCTION

A common criticism of Marx is that he did not recognise the contribution nature made to the generation of value in the production process by “constructing a labour theory of value that saw all value derived from labour, and by referring to

nature as a 'free gift' to capital"<sup>47</sup>. But, as John Bellamy Foster argues, this view is based upon a "fundamental misunderstanding of Marx's economics"<sup>48</sup>. Foster notes, that the idea of nature as a free gift to capital was a common theme in classical liberal economics, because nature has no production cost and is, in that sense, a free and non-reproducible gift to the capitalist production process. However, Marx never took up this view uncritically, and to say that he did confuses Marx's recognition that "under the law of value of capitalism nature was accorded no value", with the proposition that Marx accorded no value to nature *per se* in the production process.<sup>49</sup> I will return to the question of the law of value in capitalism below. For now, let us first focus on the concept of nature in the labour process as Marx outlined it in general terms, i.e. not specific to capitalism.

In contrast to classical economics, which, as noted earlier, erroneously sees market relations as non-historically specific, i.e. ever present, human relations, in Marx's view the essence of the production process, could be considered in abstraction from the historically specific social relations of the capitalist economy. The form, i.e. the social relations of production, may vary, but all societies are concerned with the production of wealth. Marx did not mean wealth in the sense of the obscene wealth of ruling classes, but defined it simply as "use values, that is anything that (directly in consumption or indirectly as means of production) satisfies human needs".<sup>50</sup> For Marx, land and labour were preconditions for the production of wealth across all modes of production, as he explains:

"The land on the one hand and labour on the other, [are the] two elements of the real labour-process, which... are common to all modes of production, which are the material elements of every process of production and have nothing to do with the social form."<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, this being the case, critics have still argued that Marx "defined nature as possessing use-value only as its utility was realised through the transformative power of labour",<sup>52</sup> i.e. as possessing no use value that existed independently of human labour – and therefore as not adding any value, as such, to the production process. However, as Paul Burkett argues, for Marx the labour process was mutually constituted by



Air pollution in China is growing

nature and labour, i.e. "a process in which both man and nature participate"<sup>53</sup> and he sees it as having the following elements that each rebuts the critics.<sup>54</sup>

First, one can reiterate that there is nothing unnatural regarding the labour process, or what one might call human nature. Marxists conceive of labour as, in and of itself, a natural phenomenon, but one whose form has changed socially across thousands of centuries.<sup>55</sup> As Marx puts it, "man opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, heads and hands, the natural forces of his body".<sup>56</sup> In this sense, Marx goes further than simply not identifying the labour process with historically defined forms of production, but sees the labour process as "a natural condition of human existence, a condition of material interchange between man and nature".<sup>57</sup>

This essentially develops further the arguments, made above, on human-nature interchange as it has developed across time. But to these propositions one can also add the independent factors that nature brings to the labour process. Indeed, Marx is explicit in *Capital* that "a thing can be a use-value, without having value", i.e. exchange value, and he gives the example of "air, virgin soil and natural meadows".<sup>58</sup> In short, Nature has use-values produced spontaneously without human assistance and, indeed, appropri-

ating these naturally accumulated use values is intrinsic to the labour process.<sup>59</sup> For example, fish stocks have developed through the course of natural history, and they have an obvious use value as food. Hence, when the fisherman goes out to sea to catch fish (i.e. labours) he is appropriating nature's products "in a form adapted to his own wants"<sup>60</sup>.

Logically then, it must follow that unappropriated naturally developed things have a use-value prior to their entry into the labour process; why should the fact that labour is central to use-value production "preclude a counting of currently unappropriated use-values as part of [society's aggregate] wealth"?<sup>61</sup> To use another example, our society makes a woefully insufficient use of the sun as a source of energy production, due to inadequate investment in solar power. However, it would be absurd to conclude from this that, because this energy is not fully appropriated, it is not a component of society's total material wealth, or that one should only measure its existing contribution in agriculture, for example.

Marx also adopted a conception of the "instruments of labour" that was broad and included the naturally developed conditions of the labour process. By the term, "instrument of labour", Marx referred to a "thing or complex of things, which the labourer interposes between himself and the subject of his labour, and

## Marx and Engels: "The Communist manifesto"

"The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground – what earlier century had seen such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?"<sup>73</sup>

which serves as the conductor of his activity."<sup>62</sup> "The first thing the labourer possesses himself", says Marx, "is not the subject of labour but its instrument" and this, he argued, includes all conditions necessary for the carrying out of the labour process, whether or not they enter directly into the production process, such as, for example, the air we breathe. Thus, he concludes:

"Nature becomes one of the organs of his activity... As the earth is his original larder, so too it is his original tool house. It supplies him, for instance, with stones for throwing, pressing, cutting, etc."<sup>63</sup>

As this demonstrates, nature's contribution to use-value production is not at all downgraded in Marx's economics, but is seen as providing use-values independent of, but appropriated by, human labour and the labour process. Explored further below is the distinction between exchange value and use-value, as this provides the basis, not only for a social critique of capitalism, but also an ecological one. For now, it is sufficient to note the breadth of the category use value; by pointing to all those things that contribute to the generation of wealth and the satisfaction of human needs, it may include not only basic requirements of production, but also naturally generated wealth, and, for that matter, the satisfaction of cultural and aesthetic needs.<sup>64</sup>

Up until now, the holistic, totalising aspect of the Marxist approach to the

people-nature relation has been stressed, while also outlining the importance of agency and the social relations, in order to avoid the errors of determinism; the metabolic interpenetration of nature and society, through labour, as an essential analytical foundation, has also been pointed to. If, through this process, use values were generated throughout history in a manner that was socially equitable and ecologically sound, there would be no need for this article at all. Of course, this is not the case; in fact, the development of the people-nature relation over time is contradictory, and involves a violent movement through different systems of antagonistic class relations between people.

## RELATIONAL HOLISM: DIFFERENTIATION AND CONTRADICTION

In consonance with the analysis made above, Paul Burkett argues that "holism is needed to conceptualise the natural conditions and limits of a total system of material production".<sup>65</sup> Having said this, it is worth noting that in social science a holistic – or holist – approach is often used as a term of abuse: derided for positing a totalising structure existing autonomously of individual agents, and absolutely determining their actions.<sup>66</sup> Leaving aside the questionable claims of those that tend to make this accusation,<sup>67</sup> it is nevertheless important to see structure and agency as reciprocally connected and, moreover, to see the holistic totality as internally differentiated. In short, the totality of nature-society relations creates a contradictory unity of material and social, objective and subjective, and exploiting and exploited elements.<sup>68</sup> As Lucio Colletti points out, for Marx, none of these elements are identified or reduced to the other, but exist as a unity of heterogeneous parts.<sup>69</sup>

For this reason, Burkett insists that "differentiation is necessary to capture the dynamics (over space and time) of the interchange between society and nature"<sup>70</sup>. He continues:

"These dynamics are shaped by the evolving variegation of (human and extra-human) nature in conjunction with different groups' particular relations to natural conditions, based on their particular locations in a socially organised system of production. In short, differentiated people-nature relations – and any attendant conflicts among social

groups – involve different social and material positions within the structure of human production and are not simply determined by the material variety of nature itself."<sup>71</sup>

While this argumentation is admittedly dense, Burkett is making the important point that individuals occupy different positions within the class structure of society, and different geographical, spatial locations, that both affect their experience of, and the extent to which they are able to control, interchange with nature. For example, the specific spatial location of Bangladeshi fishermen, coupled with their material impoverishment, makes them particularly vulnerable to the potentially catastrophic affects of climate change. At the other extreme, major shareholders and directors in the big oil multinationals occupy a position that sees them control a significant proportion of society's surplus, and have such material affluence as to shield themselves in large measure from the worst effects of environmental crises, and control natural sources of wealth that are harnessed in an ecologically destructive manner – of course, to the detriment of the less fortunate like Bangladeshi fishermen. For Marx, these disharmonies and inequalities expressed a fundamentally antagonistic contradiction within class societies between the labouring, surplus generating, classes and the surplus appropriating classes.

As we saw Burkett note above, differentiation in the human relation to nature is not only a social and spatial question, but also a temporal one; that is, the relationship between the human species and nature changes radically at different stages of development in human society, which are organised on the basis of different class relations. Marx saw class conflicts as developing once societies develop a surplus in production that goes beyond what is sufficient to satisfy the simple subsistence of labourers. Importantly, class conflict does not simply rise from inequitable social relations, but, rather, these are inevitable consequences, for Marx and Engels, of the material scarcity that exists at a primitive stage of development of the productive forces. This scarcity leads the human species to become enslaved to necessity, i.e. the satisfaction of immediate wants and needs. At the same time, the class struggle over the surplus at each historical stage pointed to its potential transfor-

mation. As Paresh Chattopadhyay puts it, "The development of antagonisms within a social form of production is the only historical (real) way towards its dissolution and metamorphosis."<sup>72</sup>

We can say, then, that the social division in human society allows for the accumulation of knowledge of nature. This gradually allows human production to become more "masterful" of it, insofar as more advanced forms of production reduce absolute material scarcity by raising human appropriation from nature. Nevertheless, with Chattopadhyay on this question, one should insist, against liberals, that this process is crisis ridden at two levels; firstly, it is the subject of class struggle within antagonistic modes of production, while, secondly, human societies remain at risk of quick and devastating changes in their natural environment.

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRODUCTIVE FORCES

This view of history – as "a history of class struggle"<sup>74</sup> – cuts against the classical assumptions of liberalism. For liberals, progress tends to be seen as a "cumulative and continuing improvement in the situation of human beings due notably to the continuing advances in science and technology".<sup>75</sup> While, in contrast, Marx and Engels argued that the development of the productive forces – labour, industry and scientific technique – is a process driven by class conflict. Hence, while they rejected liberal assumptions, they nevertheless had a theory of progress, but one based on the material and social development of the human species over time. As

one might suspect, this has important implications for the development of the human relation to nature over the course of time, and through different forms of production.

Marx spoke, analogously and in general terms, of three stages of historical development of human society: the savage, the civilised and the socialised.<sup>76</sup> With these terms, Marx distinguished respectively between primitive societies, where no social surplus had yet been produced; class societies, where a minority class appropriated the surplus; and a socialised society, where production was collectively controlled and the surplus equitably shared. Marx argues that, at each of these stages, "man... wrestled with nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life".<sup>77</sup> In making this statement, Marx very explicitly rejects romantic notions of history, and, rather, recognises it as a struggle, and the natural environment in which it takes place as one fraught with dangers: from disease and famine, crop failures, attacks by predatory wild animals, and so on.

The development of the productive forces over time, particularly science and technology, Marx argued, allows humanity to move towards a situation in which interchange with nature could be regulated rationally. For Marx, capitalism played a historically progressive role in this development by massively expanding society's productive forces. He argued, "it is part of the civilising aspects of capital that it enforces the production of society's surplus in a manner and under conditions which are most advantageous to the development of the pro-

ductive forces".<sup>78</sup> This development, he argued, is:

"... a practical precondition of human emancipation because without it only the penury and the necessity will be generalised and, with the need, shall also start the struggle for necessity."<sup>79</sup>

This counterposition of freedom and necessity was a key component of his materialist view of history. For Marx, necessity meant the compulsion to labour in order to satisfy one's immediate wants and needs, while freedom meant the liberation from this compulsion. The historic progressiveness of capitalism lay in its creating the material conditions for massively increasing the productivity of labour with technology and mechanisation.<sup>80</sup> However, because within capitalism the pursuit of profit was primary, innovations in technology were used to reduce the workforce, not the working day. In contrast, Marx argued, under socialism the working day would gradually be reduced, to the point where technological developments would be such that work could be abolished, replaced by the free activity of the human species (the stage of communism, or realm of freedom).<sup>81</sup> A look at modern corporations provides a powerful vindication of Marx's analysis, because they have achieved tremendous levels of productivity: using technological developments to drive down labour costs, while maintaining high production outputs. For instance, the top 200 global corporations in 2000 accounted for an astonishing 27.5 per cent of world economic activity, while employing just 0.78 per cent of the world's workforce.<sup>82</sup>

## The ten most polluted cities in the world – 2006

Compiled by the *Blacksmith Institute*

1. Sumqayit, Azerbaijan This city has heavy metal, oil and chemical contamination from its days as a centre of chemical production. Locals suffer cancer rates 22 to 51 per cent higher than their compatriots, and their children suffer from a host of genetic defects, ranging from mental retardation to bone disease.
2. Chernobyl, Ukraine Nuclear fall out from the nuclear power station still plagues the city.
3. Dzerzhinsk, Russia Toxic waste in the ground reduces the life expectancy of the residents there to only 45 years on average.
4. Kabwe, Zambia The ground here is contaminated with lead poisoning, causing birth defects amongst children.
5. La Oroya, Peru The US Doe Run mining company contaminated the land around La Oroya with lead and other metals, which have seeped into the water table.
6. Linfen, China The coal mines here have polluted the atmosphere and contaminated the water with arsenic.
7. Norilsk, Russia The world's largest iron smelting complex causes terrible air pollution, and heavy metal poisons to seep into the ground.
8. Sukinda, India The chromite mines here are the biggest in the world; an unfortunate side-effect is the terrible amount of carcinogens in the atmosphere.
9. Tianying, China The lead from the productive processes here affects thousands of residents.
10. Vapi, India A town that is viewed as India's rubbish dump: the companies who operate near the area send all their waste from production, as well as harmful chemicals and pesticides there.

As this suggests, for Marx, the historical progressiveness of capitalism was not a simple question of an expansion in human consumption levels. Nor was it, because Marx viewed expansion in the productive forces as intrinsically good, but rather it was because as Paul Burkett argues.

"(1) In... [expanding the productive forces] it negates any material scarcity rationale for class monopolies over the disposition of society's surplus labour time and production, hence over opportunities for human development insofar as such opportunities are a function of the distribution of free time and the level and security of material living standards; (2) it does so by developing the cooperative and social form of labour and production, thereby enabling humanity to overcome the socially and naturally restricted forms of development characterising pre-capitalist societies."<sup>783</sup>

Indeed, Marx was very careful not to argue that an unending rise in human consumption levels was a goal of communist development. He rather saw the ecologically unsustainable aspect of capitalism's ceaseless development of new wants and needs. In the same chapter of *Capital* as that quoted above, Marx recognised the problem capitalism generated by expanding the realm of necessity to encompass new wants, which in turn required further industrial expansion:

"With... [civilised man's] development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production to satisfy these wants also increase."<sup>784</sup>

Marx suggests that, with the development of commodity production, capitalism created new wants and needs, e.g. new goods, services, and so on, while the forces of production to satisfy these wants also increases. This process is, of course, driven by the quest for profit, which drives forward (up to a certain point) scientific and technical progress, creating the means by which humanity could achieve its emancipation, but it does so within a social division of labour, the class system, that prevents such an achievement. In short, the fact that this expansion of production is undertaken on the basis of the pursuit of profit creates inherent unevenness. On the one hand, capitalism cannot satisfy the wants and needs it creates, because it distributes the total value of surplus product –

including wages, rents, as well as, profits – highly unevenly, while at the same time the forces of production become highly concentrated in those states and regions that offer the best profits. Far from being unaware of this crisis of sustainability, Marx argues that only "socialised man" will be able to regulate a sustainable interchange between humans and nature, whereby human needs can be managed:

"Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of nature, and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature."<sup>785</sup>

The above analysis establishes the formative elements of a material, social and historical methodology of the human-nature relation, while situating capitalism in a longer historical perspective of human development. Now, we can move the analysis on to a consideration of capitalism and how it structures human relationships to nature. Marx was, of course, a life-long critic of capitalism, and, in one of his earliest works, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, he developed the foundational elements of his ecological critique of capitalism, and he did so on the basis of a materialist understanding of the capitalist labour process.

## MARX'S THEORY OF HUMAN ALIENATION FROM NATURE

In the 1844 *Manuscripts* one of the main critical concepts Marx develops is his theory of alienation. As Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho put it, this related to "the individual's relationship to physical and mental activity, fellow beings and the consciousness of these processes".<sup>86</sup> At the most abstract, general level, alienation refers to the regressive separation of what could (or rather should) exist in harmony. Marx takes the term from Ludwig Feuerbach, who argued that religion acted to distort human nature, as it invested human characteristics, like love, in an other-worldly being who stood over and above humanity.<sup>87</sup> For Feuerbach, alienation is humanity's separation from its own emotions and values, which appear as belonging to an external power.<sup>88</sup> Marx develops the con-

cept by applying it to his criticism of capitalist production. Just as religion separates the "spontaneous activity of the imagination, of the human heart" from the individual, the labour undertaken by the worker "belongs to another", as it creates profit for private capital.<sup>89</sup>

Marx argues in the *Manuscripts* that the worker suffers estrangement in the capitalist production process from the object of his/her labour: from the act of the labour process; from the creative, transformative capacity of human beings; and, finally, from each other.<sup>90</sup> He argues that the worker becomes alienated from the goods of his/her production because s/he lacks the means to consume them – as capitalist production forces him/her into debilitating poverty and despair. The capitalist labour process exploits and cajoles the worker but, for the worker, this appears as if his/her own labour, i.e. his/her own physical and mental energy, creates despairing surroundings. In turn, this leads the worker to become estranged from his/her self and other workers.<sup>91</sup> These components of the theory of alienation are relatively well known, but what is less so is how Marx related his theory of alienation to his understanding of the human-nature relation.

Marx argues that capitalism alienates humanity from its very "species-being". This term is not a familiar and everyday one, but all Marx means is the essence of the human species or our human nature. As outlined above, Marx and Engels both had a materialist conception of human nature, which was rooted in the transformative capacity of human labour to restructure external nature through its activity. In the *Manuscripts* Marx argues that, whereas the "animal is immediately identical with its life activity... man makes his life activity the object of his will and of his consciousness."<sup>92</sup> This means, unlike any other animals, the human species creates an "objective world by his practical activity"<sup>93</sup> and 'because of production nature appears as his [i.e. humanity's] work and reality. The object of labour therefore is the objectification of man's species life.<sup>94</sup> Whereas animal life was partial, focused on certain ecosystems and habitats, human life was increasingly "universal"<sup>95</sup> as all nature became an object of human activity.

The role of nature as the "direct means of life" and the "object of life activity" of

the labouring human led Marx to draw a provocative conclusion. The alienation of labour by the social relations of capitalist production led to the estrangement of its "active role in the transformation of nature".<sup>96</sup> The latter was the essence of human nature and so, Marx argued, capitalism undermined the very "species-being" of man – as the transformation of nature took place within a system of social relations, which were fundamentally exploitative and alienating. In this critique Marx points towards a society of free producers, i.e. of free human activity in which the very boundaries between work and pleasure are dissolved: communism. By liberating human activity from alienating capitalist production, communism establishes a society, which is a true expression of humanity's essential being.

In turn, this meant the social relations of capitalist production were alienating, i.e. estranging and breaking up, humanity from nature. For example, just as religion deprived humans of their own sensuous feelings, workers in the polluted urban centres of industrial capitalism had "reached the point where light, air, cleanliness, were no longer part of their existence, but rather darkness, polluted air, and raw, untreated sewage constituted their material environment".<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, in the countryside, the feudal lord or capitalist was the representative and the owner of the land, and thus, for the estranged labourer, it appeared to them that their immiseration was caused by the land, when in truth its cause was the control of the land by a few.<sup>98</sup> For Marx, the latter point<sup>99</sup> underscored his non-romantic approach to history; in the *Manuscripts* he makes the point that alienation arises from private ownership of the means of production per se, rather than being specific to industrial capitalism – albeit, with the onset of the latter, it had taken on a radically new form.<sup>99</sup>

The term, alienation, is not Marx's property and was a popular theme of romantic thought, which spoke of the alienating consequences of modernisation on the individual psyche. While this use of the term in and of itself is allusive, Marx's development of it gave it a specific materialist content. It allows us to develop a materialist understanding of the estrangement of human beings – with the attendant subjective feelings of misery and despair – from one another, and from the natural world. In Marx's

concept of the alienation of man from nature, he suggests a relationship that is systematically distorted by capitalist property relations, and his argument has a powerful normative content insofar as it points towards the possibility of a harmonious future in a communist society. This analysis in the 1844 *Manuscripts* foreshadows, as John Bellamy Foster observes, his later use of the concept of metabolism. While he commonly used it to refer to the metabolic interaction of nature and society, Marx also in the *Grundrisse*, spoke of a "general social metabolism", by which he suggests a "wider meaning" of the universal pattern of "needs and capacities" formed under capitalist production.<sup>100</sup> The latter described the "complex, dynamic, interdependent set of needs and relations brought into being and constantly reproduced in alienated form under capitalism".<sup>101</sup> Again, as in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, this raises the question of human freedom, as irrevocably linked to the organisation of human labour in relation to nature.

In his later work, Marx also made this more concrete in his theory of the alienation of the human species from nature. He did so, by analysing the separation of town and country and the corrosiveness of capitalist agricultural production; in doing so, he raised broader issues of wastefulness and sustainability. As I will now show, in introducing the concept of "metabolic rift" in the human relation to nature, he "captured the very essence of the present-day notion of sustainable development".<sup>102</sup>

### THE "METABOLIC RIFT" IN HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONS CREATED BY CAPITALISM

Marx's materialist approach recognises that nature imposes certain conditions of sustainability that, once violated, undermine the very conditions of human reproduction. Reflecting his position on the valorisation of nature in the production process, Marx is very clear that the natural world, specifically the viability of agricultural production, is an essential basis of human production and reproduction, or, to put it another way, human life itself. Without the development of a surplus in agriculture, Marx insists, all higher forms of production are impossible, because otherwise human development would remain at the stage of sub-

sistence farming and "one could not speak at all either of surplus-product or surplus value".<sup>103</sup>

This perspective led Marx to become deeply concerned with the effects modern industrial agricultural methods were having on the long-term fertility of the soil. In the 1860s, when writing *Capital*, Marx had become influenced by the work of the German agricultural chemist Justus von Liebig, who had undertaken scientific studies on soil degradation.<sup>104</sup> At this time, there was widespread concern regarding the regressive effects on soil fertility of the long-term use of chemical fertilisers; at first they appeared to increase soil fertility exponentially, but over time their overuse exhausted the soil, leaving it unproductive. For Marx this expressed the callousness of capitalism, which was undermining agriculture in the long term, only to make more profit in the short term. Analysing this process, led him to the following view:

'All progress in capitalist agriculture is progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress toward ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility.'<sup>105</sup>

Here, the "robbing" of the soil – what Marx even referred to elsewhere as "exploitation" – means simply the failure to maintain it as a means of human reproduction. He concluded that capitalism:

"... only develops the technique and the degrees of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker".<sup>106</sup>

For Marx, the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation further accelerated the basic ecological destructiveness of capitalist agriculture – and with it the natural basis of production. He argued, that, while the two sectors may appear as originally distinguished by one ruining "labour power and thus the natural powers of man, whereas" the other "does the same to the natural powers of the soil", they combine "in the later course of development".<sup>107</sup> "The industrial system, when applied to agriculture", Marx argues, "enervates the workers there, while industry and trade for their part provide agriculture with the means of exhausting the soil."<sup>108</sup> For Marx and Engels, this was not simply a question of agricultural production methods<sup>109</sup> but

related to the much more fundamental question of capitalism's separation of town and country. Marx and Engels both noted that, by raising the productivity of the land through mechanisation and chemical fertilisers, the agricultural population was increasingly reduced to a bare minimum, while being confronted with the need to sustain burgeoning industrial populations concentrated in large towns.<sup>110</sup>

Marx argued that in their totality these processes expressed the deep "metabolic rift" that capitalism opened up in the relation of humans to nature, creating an:

"irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself."<sup>111</sup>

Again, we see Marx suggest that nature imposes conditions of sustainability, which are systematically violated by capitalism, and, what is more, he suggests that this "metabolic rift" was a general feature of its development. The crux of the problem was that capitalism was interested not in human needs, or the ecological sustainability inseparably related to this, but in the maximisation of profits from investments in the shortest possible time. In the following quite remarkable extract from *Capital*, Marx speaks of capitalism destroying the material basis of human life for future generations:

"The way that cultivations of particular crops depends on fluctuations in market prices and the constant changes in cultivation with these price fluctuations – the entire spirit of capitalist production, which is orientated towards the most immediate monetary profits – stands in contradiction to agriculture, which has to concern itself with the whole gamut of permanent conditions of life required by the chain of human generations."<sup>112</sup>

As John Bellamy Foster observes, in making this comment, Marx succeeded in appreciating – long before it became a popular concept – the central importance of a sustainable programme of production, which ensured the material, natural basis for human life, the earth, was not destroyed by wanton industrial expansion.<sup>113</sup> For Marx and Engels, the lack of sustainability of capitalist agriculture was one expression of the development irrationality of capitalism per se, which they saw chiefly as arising from the town and country separation. Marx and Engels

both saw how capitalism had led to rapid urbanisation, fuelled by industrialisation in both town and country, which increasingly undermined the old feudal system. As David Harvey notes, this tendency to urbanisation arises, as capitalism becomes more and more concentrated in these geographical regions, which are most profitable:

"Transport and investments get drawn towards major centres of production, finance and commerce because that is where they are likely to be profitable. A powerful centripetal force is felt as uneven geographical investments in transport feed further uneven geographical developments."<sup>114</sup>

Engels observed how the huge stultifying urban centres meant cramped and inhospitable living conditions. At the same time, not only did these urban centres require an enormous amount of energy to maintain basic infrastructure, they were also extremely wasteful. While mistaken in the science on which his claims were based, Engels nevertheless was right to criticise the London sewage system for pouring human excrement into the Thames, which caused terrible pollution, when this waste could, he thought, be recycled as manure in agricultural production.<sup>115</sup> Marx and Engels were, of course, well aware of the need to recycle the waste of industrial production and consumption. In *Capital* Marx even went as far as describing how waste needed to be returned to the soil, as part of a complete "metabolic cycle".<sup>116</sup>

### TOWN AND COUNTRY SEPARATION – "METABOLIC RIFT" – TODAY

The fact that Marx and Engels could not have foreseen the scale of industrial urbanisation in the 20th and 21st centuries, makes their concerns for its ecological impact all the more far-sighted. Indeed, on each count, Marx and Engels' analysis of capitalist developmental trends, and their ecological ramifications have been verified by the course of events in the last 150 years. Since the 19th century, the separation of town and country, i.e. rapid urbanisation, has grown exponentially, outstripping the overall demographic growth rate – and reaching proportions Marx and Engels would have struggled to imagine. As the United Nations World Urbanisation Prospects reported in 2005:

"The global proportion of urban popu-

### Engels: "The dialectics of nature"

"In relation to nature, as to society, the present mode of production is predominantly concerned only about the immediate, the most tangible result; and then surprise is expressed that the more remote effects of actions directed to this end turn out to be quite different, are mostly quite the opposite in character; that the harmony of supply and demand is transformed into the very reverse opposite, as shown by the course of each ten years' industrial cycle."<sup>117</sup>

lation increased from a mere 13 per cent in 1900 to 29 per cent in 1950, and... reached 49 per cent in 2005. Since the world is projected to continue to urbanise, 60 per cent of the global population is expected to live in cities by 2030. The rising numbers of urban dwellers give the best indication of the scale of these unprecedented trends; the urban population increased from 220 million in 1900 to 732 million in 1950 and is estimated to have reached 3.5 billion in 2005.<sup>117</sup>

This has created enormous burdens on agriculture, which must meet growing consumer demand, while at the same time maintaining profitability against other sectors of the capitalist economy. The trend Marx cited to constantly raise the level of productivity of agricultural labour with new technology and machinery has continued apace. For example, in 1994 the United States agricultural sector reached such levels of productivity that the amount of corn produced per hour of labour was 350 times higher than that produced by the native American Cherokees with their traditional methods.<sup>118</sup> But this level of output would not have been possible, were it not for the agricultural sector harnessing enormous amounts of fossil fuel produced energy to drive machinery. As the same study notes, "the energy input in modern US agriculture is 50 times higher" than in subsistence farming.<sup>119</sup> In the long term, the danger of soil erosion Marx highlighted remains, but, in addition, the new chemical fertilisers and pesticides that partially offset the agricultural crisis Marx observed in the 19th

century have contaminated the environment, and reduced biodiversity.

The course of historical development also provides vindication for a further aspect of Marx's analysis, that is, the international dimension of the metabolic rift. As Bellamy Foster observes, Marx perceived the metabolic rift at the social level to be evident not only in the antagonism between town and country, but also, referring to Marx's writings on the exploitation of Irish land by English colonisers, on "a more global level" as "colonies saw their land, resources, and soil robbed to support the industrialisation of colonising countries"<sup>120</sup>. From our contemporary standpoint we continue to see social injustices and inequalities in agriculture, deepening the "metabolic rift" internationally, at both a social and natural level. But this has taken a different form to the process Marx pointed to in Ireland.

The uneven and combined development of world capitalism has led to backward forms of peasant agricultural production existing alongside more advanced forms in an increasingly integrated international trading system. While, on the one hand the high-productivity agriculture in the west undermines long-term ecological sustainability, on the other hand, it creates a highly competitive environment for smaller producers. As Samir Amin notes, western agriculture produces as much as 1-2 million kilograms annually of cereals per farm, while amongst the world's three billion peasants this figure can vary from 10,000 to 50,000 kilograms (for those with access to pesticides, limited machinery and so on) right down to subsistence levels.<sup>121</sup> Amin points to the danger that, as the West opens up southern markets for its agricultural exports, then the livelihoods of three billion peasants could be seriously undermined, forcing them deeper into poverty, if not outright destitution.<sup>122</sup>

No doubt, I could find a bumptious neoliberal who would ask: "what's the problem?" After all, they would argue, rapid global demographic growth means an increase in demand for agricultural products, supply will therefore need to rise to meet this demand, and hence, it is wrong to talk, as Amin does, of peasants being "under threat" by free trade in agricultural products. While, this argument may appear convincing at first, it is deliberately misleading and superficial.

Accelerating urbanisation and the attendant need for a proliferation of high-productivity agricultural methods, will lead to environmental degradation in the short to medium term, ignores the fact that production for distant markets is subject to the interruption of crises, and may find even cheaper suppliers, destroys agricultural diversity in the rural and urban environment, making populations dependent on imported foodstuffs whose prices may suddenly rise or whose supply may be interrupted. In short couching the question in terms of "supply" and "demand" ignores the fact that we are dealing with real people, that is, the real social classes, who meet supply and create demand. Rapid capitalist urbanisation is not a crisis free, rationally managed process, but is anarchic and crisis ridden, and arises in particular when, as Amin suggests, peasants are systematically undermined or outright appropriated. In China, for example, part of the reason urbanisation has been achieved so rapidly in the last twenty years is the systematic and deliberate expropriation of peasant farmers.

As this shows, the question of agricultural production and its ecological sustainability remains as central a question today as it was in the 19th century – albeit a problem that, thanks to the enormous expansion in world trade, has today far more of an international, global scope. Today's environmental crises nearly always have a certain global dimension. For instance, the famine in Niger (2005), may appear to express a local breakdown in agricultural production, that is, the environmental requirements of human social development. But in fact, it expressed structural factors operating at a global level; there was plenty of food in the markets, but the poor could not afford to buy it thanks to IMF imposed taxes on food. At a more general level, this shows, as Paul Burkett argues, that all concepts of environmental crisis refer to human development through nature and society, and the crisis occurs when human development is subject to "above normal" restrictions.<sup>123</sup> In short, environmental degradation leads to social crises, while social crises create environmental degradation.

The above analysis demonstrates that there is clearly enough empirical and descriptive evidence to show that capitalism's drive to profit fundamentally unbalances human relations with nature, while

capitalist exploitation leaves the labourer alienated from his/her natural as well as social condition. Now, let us move the analysis to a deeper interrogation of the tendential laws of capital accumulation, and the ecological destructiveness that is their inevitable result.

## THE ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTIVENESS OF CAPITAL ACCUMULATION

As Marx argued at the beginning of *Capital* (vol I) the "wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities.'"<sup>124</sup> A previously unimaginable number and range of goods and services became available – and this, he argued, was part of the "civilising mission" of capitalism. Methodologically, Marx took this view partly because he recognised that the commodity could not be viewed in abstraction from the labour it embodied, and its utility or use-value.<sup>125</sup> As noted above, capitalism's historic role consisted of developing the technical and social form of labour and production, and, in doing so, offering the material basis for shortening the working day and securing living standards. But Marx equally recognised that the very process of capitalist accumulation actually worked to negate these advances.

This could be clearly perceived with respect to its ecological destructiveness; this was a product, for Marx, not of modern production techniques *per se* but the fact that they take place according to the lawful tendencies of capitalist accumulation. Like previous class societies, capitalism was divided between appropriating and appropriated classes, but it distinguished itself by the new, dominating roles played by capital, the market and commodity production. Indeed, Marx summarised capitalism as a system of generalised commodity production, in which the labour of toiling workers – in privately owned and controlled production – produces goods and services for sale on the market. This requires that capitalism fundamentally separates the spheres of production and consumption, and a third sphere, based on market exchanges, mediates these. None of this could ever occur were it not for capital's drive to accumulate, i.e. to expand and create more capital, in the form of money (profit) that is then re-invested in search for more. As argued above, capi-

talism's tendential environmental destructiveness lies ultimately in the pursuit of profit; this can be explained scientifically by Marx's labour theory of value – once applied to environmental destruction, Paul Burkett, has called this a "value form approach" to nature-capital relations. The term is appropriate, because the theory is hinged upon an understanding of the different form that value becomes expressed in under capitalism. At the most abstract level, capital is self-expanding value, and, as far as we are concerned, this takes two main forms: commodities and money.

In pre-capitalist societies, money and commodity relations were limited, restricted to certain functions that occupied an ultimately peripheral role in social reproduction as a whole. With capitalism, conversely, market regulation of goods through exchange values becomes the form in which the value of the production process (i.e. socially necessary labour time) becomes expressed. Indeed, Marx says exchange value is the only form in which value can be expressed under capitalism.<sup>126</sup> Hence, value becomes homogeneously expressed in the products that are exchanged in the market place, that is, commodities and money. But the source of this value lies not in exchange, but in production because, as we have seen, labour's interchange with nature is the source of all value production. The capitalist must pay for these production costs through purchasing labour power or investing in machines (that embody labour from

their own production). Hence, with respect to nature and labour, there lies a critical difference, because nature requires no costs of reproduction, like workers do (i.e. they need a wage to buy food, clothes, shelter, and so on). It is a 'free gift' to capital accumulation – treated, erroneously, as a seemingly infinitely and freely exploitable source of use-value.

Nature does, however, become valued, but only indirectly in relation to labour costs, or, more specifically, the cost of reproduction of socially necessary labour time in given natural conditions. For example, particularly fertile or easily worked land commands higher rent, because it would require less labour to farm, and thereby lower the capitalists' labour costs. In general, this is a feature of the subordination of both exchange value and use-value to self-expanding value, i.e. capital itself, and, critically, this leads to "the increasing domination of profitable sale... over production for use".<sup>127</sup>

### CAPITALISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

A number of the features of contemporary environmental degradation can be understood as arising from the primacy of profitable sale over productive use. For example, David Held, Anthony McGrew *et al* outline the social good and need provided naturally by forests:

"Forests are an immense economic and ecological resource, above all for

wood. Wood is a vital component of many industrial products and processes, as a source of fuel, paper and pulp based products, and is a resource of joinery, shuttering and furniture. Ecologically, forests provide an enormous repository of genetic biodiversity and are an essential component in the global atmospheric and climate system."<sup>128</sup>

Capitalism does not, however, treat these use-values equitably, as deforestation is driven by demand for timber, which has accelerated throughout the post war period (see *Figure 1*). The aesthetic and cultural benefits of tropical forests, for example, are fraught with difficulties for capital as a source of profitable accumulation. And ultimately, these could never return profits that could compete with the continuous export of timber products, which, with minimal start up costs, are a "free gift" of nature. Even where conservation areas are developed through state initiative, they are under constant harassment from the market. This may take a legal form of private sector lobbying of political institutions, or they may be undermined by illegal logging or poaching, while the state is underfunded, and lacks the means to enforce its own regulations. In either case, capital encroaches on these areas, and demands they be opened up to the capital accumulation process.

The addition to fossil fuels as the primary source of energy in modern society also illustrates how capitalist social relations lead to deep developmental irrationalities. Leaving aside their different

Figure 2

Relative levels of resource consumption in the industrialised and developing worlds 1986-1990

	Industrialised Countries	Developing Countries
Fossil fuels (gigajoules per capita)	160.1	17.3
Aluminium (metric tonnes/ 100 people)	14.1	0.7
Roundwood (cubic meters per capita)	1.3	0.5
Beef and veal (kilograms per capita)	27.2	4.3
Cotton (kilograms per capita)	5.4	2.6

ecological impact for a moment, one can still say that renewable energy sources and fossil fuels operate according to quite fundamentally different spatial-temporal dynamics – making fossils fuels far more suited to a system of generalised commodity production. In temporal terms, renewables are effectively unlimited in the long-term duration of their exploitation, but can only be exploited at a limited rate. Whereas fossil fuels are a “stock-type” resource that, while having only a limited stock (and therefore temporally limited), can nevertheless be exploited at a high speed, or rather, they are only limited by the spatial constraints affecting how quickly the reserves can be located and extracted.

Moreover, the process of exploration, production and sale of fossil fuel energy makes it an ideal investment, in a manner that renewable energy production is simply not suited. The fundamental difference is that fossil fuels, as a source of energy, can themselves be made into commodities, whereas, with renewables, such as wind, solar and tide, it is not the energy source, as such, but the means of harnessing it in the form of windmills, solar panels and tidal barrages, that can take the form of commodities and, therefore, capital. Indeed, for solar power to be taken up at extensively, it would require a shift to a different sector of capital, i.e. manufacturing and infrastructure, with high overheads and questions hanging over its “commercial viability” (i.e. profitability). While, similar high costs are increasingly associated with fossil fuel extraction, currently they are offset by rising oil prices, which are partially a consequence of material scarcity. Moreover, there is a social-historical dimension, in that a sector of the ruling class in the fossil fuel industry has accumulated significant social power that can obstruct research and innovation, with respect to renewables, and thereby devalue them as a potential investment.

Both modern capitalism and the environmental degradation, to which it gives rise, are international in their scope and scale. In the current world order, levels of internationalisation are not simply a question of trade, but involve elaborate networks of globalised production. But these are dominated by huge concentrations of corporate capital. For example, in 2000 a comparison of corporate sales to GDP size shows that, of the 100 largest “economies” in the world, 51 were cor-

porations and only 49 were countries.<sup>129</sup>

As David Harvey puts it:

“Immense concentrations of corporate power [now exist] in energy, the media, pharmaceuticals, transportation, and even retailing (for example WalMart).”<sup>130</sup>

Capital, hence, introduces unbridled internationalisation, but only on the basis of the dominance of large monopolies, thereby systematically reproducing uneven development, with attendant inequalities. In environmental terms, this leads to gross inequalities in levels of resource consumption and, clearly related to this, environmental degradation. As *figure 2* shows, a World Resources Institute report in 1995 highlighted the dramatic gap between consumption of fossil fuels in industrialised states and developing countries.

Notwithstanding this, it is in the very nature of capitalism that its centralising and monopolising features exist reciprocally alongside counter-tendencies. In recent years, much has been said, with good reason, about the dramatic rise of China as a world industrial power. Its cheap labour force and integration into the global trading system have played a key role in stabilising the US economy in particular.<sup>131</sup> Its rise has gone alongside a dramatic increase in environmental degradation. As David Harvey notes:

“The two main culprits in the growth of carbon dioxide emissions these last few years have been the powerhouses of the global economy, the US and China (which increased its emissions by 45 per cent over the past decade)... In the case of China, the rapidity of industrialisation and of the growth of car ownership doubles the pressure on energy consumption. China has moved from self-sufficiency in oil production to being the second largest importer after the US.”<sup>132</sup>

These simple facts illustrate the scale of capitalism’s consumption problem; to rise as a world power, in a highly competitive global market, it is natural and inevitable that a state like China – that has clear imperial ambitions if not imperial status – will seek to match the form and methods of production of the world’s foremost power. Such states will have an inevitable tendency to use existing technologies on an increased scale, to raise industrial output, while avoiding high cost research, development and innovation. The fact that all this is driven by the chaos of market competition underlines the point we saw Marx make, that social-

ism is the only relief from this process, as it allows humanity to begin the long task of rationally regulating its interchange with nature in a manner that is ecologically sustainable. Clearly, today, there exists a fundamental problem of wasteful production, and, in some states, outright prodigality with regards to consumption. Moreover, this remains fuelled by carbon emitting fossil fuel production.

## CAPITAL ACCUMULATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

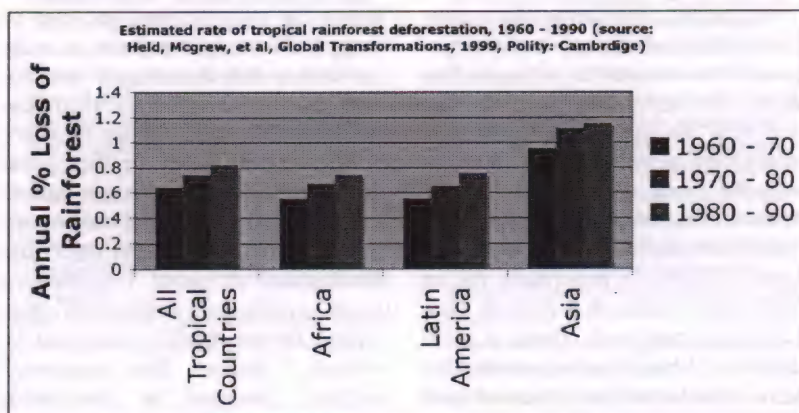
The “value form approach” to capital-nature relations, can be used as a foundation from which to explore further ecological irrationalities of capital. *Pace* this critique of capitalism, which within its negation of production for use or need, in favour of profitability, it is important to note that capitalism creates its own functional needs, and that, therefore, things come to have a use-value within its economic process of capital accumulation. As Michael Lebowitz puts it:

“The conception of use-value thus shifts from something embedded in ‘any system whatever human needs’ to a more specific understanding of how social wants and needs are shaped under the capitalist mode of production.”<sup>133</sup>

With this in mind, let us consider the role of fossil fuels within the capitalist accumulation process. As I noted above, one feature of the deeply ecologically unsustainable character of modern industrial agriculture is its dependency on fossil fuels to power machinery. Hence, for the process of capital accumulation within the agricultural sector, fossil fuels play a crucial role in powering the “dead labour” (i.e. machines) that are able to massively increase productivity levels. When fossil fuels are used in global freight transportation, they play a functional role for capital, in that they lower turnover time, and thereby, all things being equal, increase profitability.

This latter point is extremely important, regarding the ecological irrationalities of capital accumulation, when considered in the context of the uneven and combined development of modern capitalism. The point can be demonstrated by drawing on Marx’s analysis of the circuits of capital in the *Grundrisse*. Marx saw that, in the production process, capital moves in a circular dynamic through different forms; the finished product (commodity) is sold and transformed into

Figure 2



money, which is then retransformed into the conditions of production (raw material, instrument, wages).<sup>134</sup> He wanted to know how this movement affected the self-realisation of capital, i.e. the accumulation of profit. In doing so, Marx illustrated how capitalism created a certain spatial-temporal geography, i.e. required a certain structuring of space and time, which was deeply anti-ecological.

The sections of circulation, argues Marx, took specific amounts of time, and these affected how profitable the enterprise was. The faster the circuit of capital could be completed, the more commodities could be created by labour in any specific amount of time; and, similarly, the faster these could be sold and recouped as profit, the greater the total

mass of profit returned to the capitalist. In short, spatial distance appeared to reduce itself to time. This meant the speed of circulation appeared as a natural barrier to the realisation of labour time, because the longer the circulation process lasted – in time – the greater amount of labour power would be needed to realise the same amount of profit.<sup>135</sup> Marx came to the conclusion that capitalism:

“... must on the one hand strive[to break down] down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market; it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another. The more devel-

oped the capital, therefore, the more extensive the market over which it circulates, which forms the spatial orbit of its circulation, the more it strive simultaneously for an ever greater extension of the market and for greater annihilation of space by time.”<sup>136</sup>

Running through this analysis is an evocative conception of the speed of capitalist transformation. It reminds us of Marx and Engels’ contention in the *Communist Manifesto* that, with capitalism, “all that is solid melts into air”, as society is dramatically transformed. The concept of capitalism “conquering the Earth” also appears to suggest that this “annihilation of space by time” creates powerful imperatives with respect to nature. Marx’s assertion that capital intrinsically seeks to abolish circulation time – to secure circulation without circulation time – is strikingly suggestive, implying as it does that capitalism strives for something that is physically impossible. It invokes an image of capitalism struggling to rupture the laws of space and time – the ultimate “metabolic rift”. Concretely too, the drive to expand capitalism spatially (“conquer the Earth”), while at the same time reducing to a minimum the time spent in motion (“annihilate space by time”) drives certain patterns of development. For instance, if investments do not offer an adequate rate of return in a sufficient amount of time for the capitalist, then they become unattractive, and this creates a motivation for a whole number of socially and ecologically unsound “short cuts” in the production process. Furthermore, in more general terms, the need for quick returns must negate all attempts at long term and sustainable planning.

To this can be added the geographical and infrastructural imperatives, created by these patterns of capital circulation. The latter demands a certain geography, and therefore creates tendential developmental patterns. For example, look at the transport and communications systems. As David Harvey notes:

“Spatially fixed and immobile physical infrastructures of transport and communications systems (ports, airports, transport systems) are required in order to liberate other forms of capital and labour for easy spatial movement.”<sup>137</sup>

In the last fifteen to twenty years, reductions in the cost of freight transport, and the development of communi-



Fishermen make their way through dead fish in the Wuhan river, China – caused by pollution

cation technology have formed one feature of the establishment of global networks of production in goods and services. The international trading system, for example, is able to plan the movement of clothes made in Chinese sweatshops to consumers in the west. Indeed, globalisation created real deflationary pressures in goods, by drawing on these cheap labour sources, which made it financially viable to ship commodities across the globe.

## CONCLUSION

The highly combined, integrated character of global capitalism – despite all its unevenness and disequilibrium – also has a contradictory social and political impact on the lives of all the exploited and oppressed classes. The development of global production and technology has a powerful unifying effect on both workers, poor peasants and the urban poor; as the scale of communication increases and the time it takes decreases, it becomes easier (albeit not easy) to organise the resistance. At the same time, capitalism more and more comes to dominate the time of the oppressed class, demanding, as it does, greater intensities of exploitation, while also destroying the spatial, i.e. natural environment, in which humanity lives and works. In this way, capitalism creates the conditions for its own negation – but such are its destructive tendencies, that Marx and Engels' warning that history will end "either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes" appears more apt than ever.

While one should be always be careful of apocalyptic predictions, nevertheless, what is remarkable of the period we are living in, is the degree of consensus amongst those who by rights should know, the scientific community, that it is difficult to over-estimate the scale of the ecological crisis. As 1,575 of the world's distinguished scientists put it in 1992:

"Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at risk the future we wish for human society and the planet and animal kingdom, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our

course will bring."<sup>138</sup>

On the basis of the known facts, surely all right-minded people ought to concur with this analysis. Yet, of course, they do not. The rich and the powerful either still deny the undeniable or insist that whilst some measures are needed to prevent the worst disasters their profits must be sacrosanct. The question – "what lies at the root of the problem" – is hence of enormous importance, not for intellectual reasons but political ones. Capitalism may have created a social division of labour that has provided the technical, scientific and material basis for real equality between people, for a society based on free, unalienated human beings; but that very social division has come to be an obstacle to liberation, and must be overthrown. The socialist organisation of production can re-integrate humanity with nature, i.e. end its alienation, on the basis of a growing knowledge of our surroundings and a sustainable, ecologically sound development programme.

One common argument that is often rehearsed in the ecological movement is that the need for action is "too urgent" to start speaking of a revolution, or socialism as the necessary solution to climate change – even if capitalism is ultimately to blame. At one level this argument lacks basic intellectual coherence; capitalism is the cause, but we don't have time to get rid of capitalism. This is surely equivalent to having a mouse infestation in your home, but insisting you don't have time to lay a mousetrap because it is "too urgent". At the same time, if we just ran around, arguing we needed to get rid of capitalism, we would not get very far.

We need to link the social and economic struggles of the subaltern classes with the need to defend the natural environment, as the basis for human life. Indeed, a key axis of socialist intervention into the environment movement is, on the one hand, the big question of capitalism, but also, on the other, the need to take up the social and economic demands of the oppressed classes, that is, the working class, peasantry, the poor, the indigenous and dispossessed. Likewise, the masses must be won not only to a struggle for the protection of their own immediate, particular environments, but also the fight against fossil fuel production, and for a planned shift to renewables.

Whereas in the past, Communists linked the struggle over, say, jobs or wages to the struggle for power, so today we need to link the struggle over, for example, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, last summer's north European floods, or the central African drought to the struggle against capitalism and for working class power. In the 21st century we can expect the development of social revolutionary crises, as institutions in states and whole regions become fatally undermined by ecological disaster. The transitional method, developed by the young Communist International in the early 1920s, and codified by Leon Trotsky in the 1930s, must be creatively re-elaborated to take account of humanity's crisis. Necessarily, on this question more than any other, no one can seriously suggest that the answer can be national in form. To tackle an environmental crisis of global proportions a new global political force is needed, a new, Fifth International, founded on a revolutionary socialist programme.

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# France: can a new, revolutionary party be forged in struggle?

*In last autumn's struggles in France the spontaneous militancy of the workers stood in stark contrast to the treachery and cowardice of their leaders. Now, the forces of the revolutionary left appear to be entering a period of splits and re-composition.*

**Marc Lassalle** argues that achieving clarity on a revolutionary programme and taking steps towards a new fighting party of the working class are the burning tasks of the period ahead

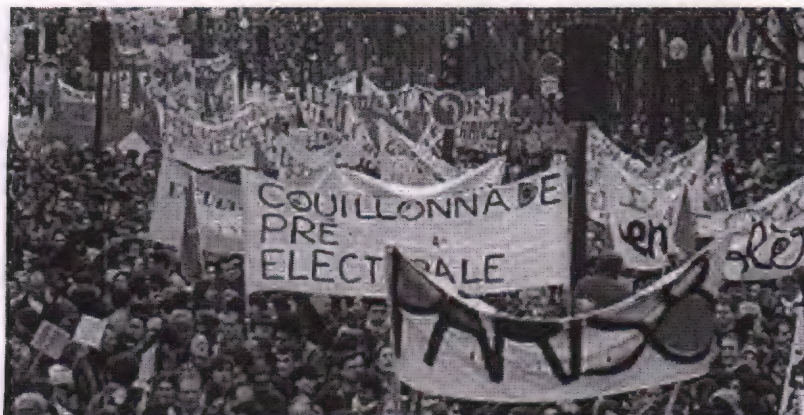
The last year has been a crucial one in France. First, Nicolas Sarkozy was elected president on a platform that promised a wave of massive attacks against the working class. Then came the first major battle, as railway workers defied him. Although they were defeated on the field of battle, this was a result of the betrayals of their own leaderships, not any reluctance to fight. Indeed, the union leaders had clearly signalled their intention to surrender on the very eve of the battle. Lastly, once again, the "revolutionary left" proved to be the dog that did not bark, that is, it failed to alert workers to bureaucratic treachery. This left – the heirs of May 1968 – is itself clearly at a turning point. Lutte ouvrière (LO), the most unchanging of them all, is moving rightwards to standing on a common slate with the Parti socialiste (PS) and has finally expelled its only faction. Meanwhile, the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) has decided to launch a new, anticapitalist party.

In many respects France is an exception among the European countries. Despite attempts at privatisation by successive governments since 1995, the state still controls major enterprises in key sectors like energy and transport. The public welfare system, the Sécurité Sociale, manages an enormous budget of €400 billion including pensions, health and unemployment benefits. In whole sectors, like education, childcare, universities and healthcare, the private sector plays a very limited role. Moreover, labour market regulation is amongst the tightest in Europe, offering real protection to workers with regular fulltime employment. Most of these workers are employed with a Contrat à Durée Indéterminée, whose strict rules regulate the 35 hour week, long vacations, restrictions against shop-steward victimisation

and sacking. In short, the main structures of class collaboration that were created during de Gaulle's short-lived post war government, in which the Parti communiste français (PCF) served, are still in place.

Today, neoliberal commentators and financiers regard France as the new "sick man of Europe". Public debt stands at 66 per cent of GDP and has grown faster than in any other EU country. The share of French exports outside the euro area has dropped by 18 per cent while Germany's has grown by 15 per cent. GDP growth has been sluggish at around 2 per cent in recent years in contrast to a euro-zone average of 2.8 per cent. For many years, French bosses have been demanding a radical change. They want a drastic cut in taxes and public spending, privatisation of public services and a total deregulation of labour supply and conditions. The latter includes longer working hours, fewer social benefits, lower pensions and easier sacking of workers.

The previous president, Jacques Chirac, although sympathetic to many of these demands, was not the man to steer France into the neoliberal club. Having served in government with every president since de Gaulle, Chirac had too many ties to the old regime and its system of social and power relations. A political opportunist, he adopted or dropped policies depending on whether they would strengthen or weaken his own position. In 1995, he was elected on a platform of closing the "social rift" between rich and poor, only to appoint Prime Minister Alain Juppé with the project of cutting pensions and reducing public sector spending. The result was a tidal wave of class struggle, again headed by the railway workers, which forced the government into a humiliating climb-down. As an effective proponent of



French youth demonstrating against the CPE in spring 2006

neoliberal "reforms", Chirac never recovered from this defeat. In 1997, he tried to get a clear mandate for them by calling new elections, but these delivered a PS government led by Lionel Jospin. This government, despite introducing flexibility and, indeed, more privatisations than Chirac, had to make concessions to workers in the shape of the 35 hour week.

Chirac's second term as president followed a similar course. Having been re-elected with 82 per cent of the vote in the second round, against Jean Marie Le Pen of the far right, he did manage to push through some partial reforms. Once again, however, he met with vigorous resistance from the working class. In both 2003 and 2004, huge waves of strikes and protests against the reforms rocked the country and threatened to spiral into a general strike. In 2005, in the referendum on the European Union constitution, the No Campaign of the Left struck a body blow to Chirac and neoliberalism. Soon after, the youth of the *banlieues* (suburbs) rebelled against racist police repression and brutality, as well as their appalling living conditions and an average unemployment rate running at 40-50 per cent. In 2006, Chirac's prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, attempted to introduce laws that would have reduced job security for young workers. This "First Employment Contract" (CPE) project had to be withdrawn in the face of enormous resistance from the youth, including university and high school students, who won the active support of workers.

The balance sheet of the Chirac years is clear. Neoliberal reforms were successfully delayed or even blocked altogether by workers' resistance. What is more, the role of the PS in government during this period finally broke the illusions of many

workers who had seen in it a party of the left. Yet, at the same time, the working class has not emerged out of these struggles united around a new leadership, that is, a party, and programme. While the rank and file of the unions were able to drag their leaders into action on these reforms, most of these officials were unwilling to fight and some actually agreed with the government's proposals. This huge gap, between combativity and resistance from the workers on the one side and a treacherous bureaucratic leadership on the other, has been a permanent feature of the class struggle over recent years.

### SARKOZY'S DECLARATION OF WAR

The 2007 presidential election was rightly perceived as a decisive change. After winning control of the main right wing party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), Nicolas Sarkozy promoted himself as the French Margaret Thatcher who would break the power of the unions and cut workers' rights and social gains to the bone. Sarkozy also successfully used populist and racist demagoguery in the name of fighting crime, promising repression and victimisation of immigrants and youth. Indeed, the whole 2005 rebellion in the *banlieues* started when he openly referred to the youth in these areas as "filth" that he would clean out with high-pressure hoses. This, of course, proved popular with the reactionary and racist electorate of Jean-Marie Le Pen. In his presidential campaign, Sarkozy also combined "law and order" with the urgency of a radical change, a "break" towards, although he did not say it openly, neoliberalism. Reflecting this, his motto was: "work more to earn more".

After his election, Sarkozy lost no time.

First, he rewarded his own social class generously, with a €15 billion package of measures for the bosses and the rich, including hefty cuts in inheritance and wealth taxes. Then he proceeded to a series of brutal attacks against the workers:

- Restrictions on the right to strike and the introduction of a "minimum service provision" in the transport sector (where the vanguard of the French working class is).
- A general cut in the reimbursement of medical expenses – a measure that hits lower income workers hardest.
- Privatisation of state owned utility companies: in the case of GDF, the gas company, this was despite his earlier promise not to privatise it, and was brought about via its fusion with the private water, gas and electricity monopoly, Suez.
- 20,000 job cuts in the public sector, most of them among teachers.
- Steps towards bringing private enterprise and the market into the universities.
- The end of special pension schemes for railway, metro and electricity workers

This was just the first round. This year, Sarkozy has gone on to "reform" the labour laws, in a way reminiscent of the defeated first employment contract (CPE). He has created a new ministry of "immigration and national identity" with the implication that the French nationhood is under threat. He has given this body the task of ensuring 25,000 deportations a year and justifies this with the racist lie that immigrants are taking jobs from French workers and are responsible for crime and other social ills.

### RAILWAY WORKERS STRIKE BACK

The first big social battle was around the *régimes spéciaux*, the pension schemes for some 500,000 public sector workers, in the railway, metro, and electricity industries. Here, the rank and file were ready for a long and hard fight and were united around the demand to scrap the new pension "reform" altogether. Their union leaders, however, had a very different position. All of them, except the smaller SUD union, were convinced that "pension reform" was inevitable and that their role was not to organise all out resistance to this neoliberal assault but, as they put it, "to accompany it", i.e. to negotiate minor alterations to it. The

CGT, the strongest union in the railway sector, for all its tougher words, also adopted this line. Its leader, Bernard Thibault, was invited several times to the presidential palace for friendly discussions.

How did the union leaders succeed in derailing the strike despite the combativity of their members? First, instead of uniting all the workers who were under attack from Sarkozy, they mobilised each sector separately. After a very successful day of action and strike on 18 October, the railway workers spontaneously continued the strike for several days, despite union leaders urging them to return to work and to "prepare their forces" for another day of action the following month. Then the leaders fixed a day of strike action for teachers and the public sector for 20 November, although railway and metro workers were due to strike on 14 November. The leaders hoped this strike would peter out after a few days so that no united action between the different sectors would occur but the metro and railway workers continued their action, causing a week of chaos in the French transport system.

On the very eve of the big strike on 20 November, Thibault announced he was in favour of separate negotiations with the government for each sector (railway, metro, electricity workers) a move that would enormously weaken each one's bargaining position. This was clearly recognised by the rank and file as a total stab in the back. Anger and resentment were very strong. François Chérèque, leader of the CFDT union, who had opposed a united struggle all along, was forced off the Paris demo by furious workers but Thibault, too, was hissed at mass meetings of railworkers. The anger was such that Sarkozy even told *Le Monde* (26 November) "we have to save private (*le soldat*) Thibault" from his own members by "conceding" a month of negotiations, while insisting that an end to the strikes was a pre-condition for talks. He calculated that the strikes would lose all momentum in this period and the union leaders would assent to virtually all his demands. He was right.

On 20 November the three sectors in struggle marched together: metro and railway workers fighting for their pension rights; postal, gas and electricity workers, facing privatisation; teachers affected by job cuts; students against a "reform" of universities opening them to the bosses'

influence and effectively preparing their privatisation. So why were the rank and file, who had mobilised for the days of action by means of *assemblées générales* (AGs or local mass meetings in the workplaces) and who, in the case of rail and metro workers, had struck for over a week to unite with the teachers, students, and other workers, not able to resist the sell out? Quite simply because they had no alternative leadership, no democratic organisational structure that could lead and coordinate their struggles, free from the bureaucrats' stranglehold.

In the days following 20 November, under massive CGT pressure and feeling isolated, the rail and metro workers' AGs voted for the "suspension" of the strike. The union leaders trumpeted the opening of separate negotiations with Sarkozy as a victory. Indeed it was, but for Sarkozy, and his loyal "privates", the trade union leaders. They ensured their continued right to negotiate away their members' rights.

So, during October and November last year, there was a marvellous opportunity to force the scrapping of the pension reform, as workers did in the face of previous attacks (1995, 2006-07). All the elements for a victorious movement were present: a key militant sector, the railway and metro workers, were on indefinite strike; much wider layers of public sector workers were ready to fight against the government; school and university students were already fighting the education reforms; and the youth in the *banlieues* again rose up against racist police harassment and homicide. In short, an almighty rebellion could have forced the Sarkozy government into surrender, and even threatened its very existence.

The reformist trade union leaders, ever the willing doctors called to the bed of an ailing capitalism rather than its undertakers, did everything in their power to prevent such a revolutionary situation emerging. These bureaucrats cannot envisage a higher goal than negotiating slightly better conditions for workers. Thus, when the government demands a give-back of workers' previous gains, all they can think of is ensuring that they negotiate the giving. At no point do they even conceive of mobilising the workers to defeat these attacks outright, let alone force a political confrontation between the government and the streets, a confrontation that might threaten the very existence of French capitalism.

Was a general strike against Sarkozy possible? Yes it was. The central missing element was a political force, a revolutionary party, with roots in the working class and a clear revolutionary intervention into the movement. It would have fought for the creation of joint committees of all sections of workers with the students and *banlieue* youth, and for self-defence squads against scabs, police and provocateurs. Central to this would have been the development of workers' self-organisation, going beyond the local *assemblées générales* and coordinations (meetings of delegates from the various sectors) into a national network with an elected central leadership. This alone could have effectively challenged the right of the trade union leaders to negotiate a defeat. Heading a vast national network, as big as the movement that defeated the European Constitution, it could have mobilised workers in other sectors around a programme of action to defeat the whole Sarkozy offensive.

Pushing through the pension reform was a clear victory for Sarkozy. However, it was not yet the strategic defeat of the French working class that Sarkozy is after. More and bigger attacks are planned and, because of their politics, the union leaders will fail to oppose them as well. Indeed, they will be more determined to prevent an effective fight than to lead one. The reformism of the trade union leaders means that they accept, fully and unconditionally, the permanence of the capitalist state, and the need to respect and obey it, whatever sacrifices it may demand of the workers. Protest to let off steam, to try to persuade certainly, but if anyone wants to seriously modify or reverse the bosses' attack then it must be done via the ballot box, not by direct action. This is all the union leaders will allow, but only in order to divert their members' anger towards future elections, not in order to win on the streets.

After the strikes, they have begun to talk again about a closer partnership with the Parti socialiste. Against this petty electoralism, revolutionaries should maintain that the struggles against Sarkozy in the workplaces, in the schools, in the universities and on the streets are potentially a political struggle, and that a mass strike wave will quickly pose the question, "Who rules – the bosses or the workers?" The problem facing the union leaders in the face of Sarkozy's continuing attacks is that the only electorally

viable reformist party, the PS, is in a terrible state following its trouncing by Sarkozy last Spring.

## REFORMISM AT A LOSS

After the presidential election, despite or, rather, because of, the rising level of the class struggle, the whole spectrum of the reformist left in France is in a devastated state. In particular, PS has been virtually silent on Sarkozy's policies, still less joining any resistance to them. Why? First, many Parti socialiste leaders wholeheartedly agree with the need for "reforms", even with Sarkozy's reforms – for instance the pension reform. Second, incredibly, many important PS leaders have actually accepted positions as ministers or advisers in Sarkozy's government!

Bernard Kouchner, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, is leading the war-mongering against Iran. Another Socialist, Fadela Amara, initiator of a campaign (*Ni pute, ni soumise*) against women's oppression in the *banlieues*, has taken a junior post in the ministry headed by the arch-reactionary Catholic, anti-abortionist and homophobe, Christine Boutin. Another, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, defeated challenger to Ségolène Royal for the PS presidential candidacy, accepted Sarkozy's appointment to the Managing Directorship of the International Monetary Fund!

Meanwhile, the PS leaders are deeply divided and continuing an internecine conflict for control of the party. In political terms, all the PS leaders agree with continuing the rightward evolution of the entire European social democracy, following in the steps of Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and José Zapatero. This has taken its logical endpoint in Italy with Walter Veltroni, the ex-leader of the Democratic Socialists, transforming his party into a fully-fledged US-style Democratic Party through a fusion with openly bourgeois parties.

The first steps of the neoliberalisation of the PS were already clear in the government of Lionel Jospin, who successfully and without serious opposition privatised many state-owned companies and introduced elements of "work flexibility" through the 35-hour week reform. He happily signed up to the Nice Treaty and the Lisbon agenda. Further steps on this road were taken in the campaign of Ségolène Royal. Her programme was a mish-mash of weak concessions to her working class base (increase of minimum

wage, no job cuts in the public sector) with the overall goal of a new "just order" with authoritarian nationalist overtones and creeping neoliberal reform. An emblematic measure of her new order was the creation of "re-education" camps for "juvenile delinquents", under the control of the army. After the election she revealed that she never believed in her own programme, and in particular the promise of wage increases, although that was a PS policy! She also disclosed that she had maintained contact between the two rounds with rightwing candidate François Bayrou, whom she had secretly promised to appoint as Prime Minister.

Today, all PS leaders agree on this overall rightward direction arguing only about its speed and who should lead it. While Royal is pushing for acceleration towards the right, the rest of the party is more reluctant to follow her. They make the not unreasonable calculation that French workers will be hit by Sarkozy's attacks, and will use a vote for the PS to stop him. Hence, they think the PS should at least downplay its support for Sarkozy's reforms, and just sit comfortably in their chairs, either in parliament or in the mayoralties, and wait to come back to power in five years.

It is certainly not the Parti communiste français that will disrupt this cynical calculation. With a result barely above 1 per cent, the PCF is close to its end as an independent force in electoral politics. It owes its survival, both political and organisational, to its alliance with the PS to keep its MPs and its positions in local administrations. While it retains an influence in the working class through its relatively large membership and its strong (but weakening) bonds with the CGT bureaucracy, its members and leaders are patently deeply demoralised and suffering from an identity crisis.

Clearly, the trade union leadership will be unable to completely sit out the struggles of the next few years. Given the impotence of political reformism and the attacks of this government, they are caught in the front lines of the battle. They have all, including the CGT, made their cowardly choice: to negotiate with the government over minor concessions that will barely and very partially mitigate a brutal shift towards longer hours, insecure jobs, less rights and more exploitation. These leaders feel cushioned from the anger of their basis by the many layers of intermediate bureaucracy, the lack

of internal democracy and the temporary political irrelevance of the bourgeois workers' party.

The political struggle against betrayal by trade union leaderships is a crucial task for the far left in France in the months and years ahead. Given the confusion and weakness of the reformist left, given the onslaught from Sarkozy and the bosses and the cowardice of the union leaders, it might seem obvious that an enormous opportunity presents itself to the revolutionary left: an opportunity to show its mettle as an alternative leadership, armed with a practical strategy for beating off Sarkozy's attacks and reviving the workplace and political organisation of the working class movement. Such, indeed, is the case, objectively speaking. The circumstances in France today offer enormous possibilities to build a new party, drawing into its ranks the front line fighters from the trade unions, the schools and colleges, the *banlieues*, to create a real Leninist combat party. Such a party would of course not simply group together the revolutionary vanguard but would, without any sectarian self-isolation, utilise the united front and transitional demands to maintain and strengthen the closest links with the millions of still reformist workers, helping them to expose, control and replace the treacherous trade union bureaucrats and win victories against Sarkozy that would eventually convince these workers that they can overthrow the capitalist class and reorganise society to meet the needs of the millions, not the millionaires. So how has the actual "revolutionary left" in France responded to these opportunities? Unfortunately, precisely by not offering a clear proposal for building a revolutionary party or outlining a revolutionary transitional programme.

## LO: FROM ECONOMISM TO PACT WITH SOCIALISTS

No one should doubt that the several thousand militants and supporters of the major far left organisations in the trade unions, schools and universities, particularly LO and the LCR, played an important role in the Autumn mobilisations against Sarkozy. It was the political strategy and tactics of their leaderships that failed the movement.

With *Lutte ouvrière* it has often seemed to outsiders that nothing has ever changed and nothing ever will. They keep repeating the same flawed analysis and

answers like a religious mantra. They raise only the most immediate demands, avoid the question of government, raise no transitional demands, ignore issues like racism, deny globalisation and refuse to participate in the mobilisations connected with it, and basically tail what they believe to be the present consciousness of vanguard militants in the workplace.

For LO, the economic struggle of the working class, in the narrowest sense, is the only important terrain of battle. Although it has important historical roots in the working class, it ultimately believes that it cannot have an influence on the course of the class struggle. In its own terms, a global workers' movement will erupt one day to smash capitalism but, in the meantime, denouncing capitalism and keeping alive the belief in socialism is the main, indeed the only, task.

How then should revolutionaries relate to a class struggle that does not develop exclusively around the economic demands of blue-collar workers? LO does not have a clue. Worse, it considers it a dangerous distraction from more important issues. During the 2005 *banlieues* youth rebellion, LO, far from denouncing the state racism and repression, denounced... the youth. For LO, the *banlieue* youth were not part of the working class and it denounced with contempt their struggle as lumpen acts of vandalism. This attitude continued during the CPE struggle when LO denounced the direct actions of the youth (blocking train stations and motorways) as dangerously counterposing the youth and the working class. In reality, the youth were playing a vanguard role in rallying the mass of the workers into action. Instead, LO praised the role and the unity of the trade union leaders, at a time when they were doing all they could to limit the demands of the movement as well as the movement's influence on the working class. In these two important crises, LO economist orthodoxy was revealed to be worse than useless.

LO's electoral campaign in 2007 was abstract and dull, even for them. Their main slogan was: "LO, always on the side of the workers" – clearly neither an inspiration to struggle against the coming neoliberal offensive nor any solution to the crisis of leadership. LO's programme was, if anything, even worse than before. It was called "a programme of defence of the workers" and had very little in it

beyond a series of reforms: a plan for more social housing, a minimum wage of €1,500, the creation of 750,000 jobs in the public sector. Its most radical measures to achieve these reforms were opening the books of the corporations and taxing the rich.

The preamble to this platform raised hopes for a "powerful social movement capable of scaring the bosses and making them retreat". Arlette Laguiller, LO's presidential candidate, continued by outlining how, one day, popular anger will erupt and create this mass movement and that:

"It is in order that this movement does not aim at a wrong goal when it happens that I propose this programme that contains nothing revolutionary in the sense that it does not foresee either the expropriation of capital or the transformation of the private propriety of large companies into collective propriety, into the property of the state. However, this programme re-establishes a little the equilibrium between the capitalist class and the workers. What I propose here is what should be the first steps of a presidency and a really socialist government."

This encapsulates LO's method with all its tailism and passive propagandism. Instead of seeking to organise the vanguard around an action programme that strikes at capitalism, LO adapts to prevalent reformist ideas and demands. The whole idea that a mighty workers' movement would aim simply to restore the balance with the bosses is a utopian fantasy. Disequilibrium and instability are constant features of capitalism, ones that arise from the exploitative character of the capital-labour relation and the process of capital accumulation. More to the point, the latter processes create a class society that is contradictory, with a working class fragmented and subject to different ideological and political influences.

The very idea of a "perfect" social movement, like the one implied in the LO schema, is a fantasy. What we have is the reality of class struggle and actual social movements on the streets in France today that, with all their attendant problems and difficulties, nevertheless, express the potentiality of a socialist revolution. To realise this potential means presenting the working class with a strategy that seeks to turn the struggles taking place today into a struggle for power, for a workers' government, for a socialist

revolution. It means avoiding the twin errors of opportunism and sectarianism, by using united front tactics to enable the working class to take effective action, while at the same time exposing the treachery of its existing leadership and distinguishing revolutionary politics and demands from the reformist programme.

For LO, having long ago abandoned the transitional programme as "only applicable in revolutionary situations", this method is completely alien. What is more, LO, of course, has nothing to say to victims of social oppression and state racism, like the *banlieue* youth, except the most abstract explanations of racism as being caused by capital and finger wagging about the danger of "lumpen actions" like burning cars, municipal property and buses. The question of how these young people's struggle, with all its militancy, courage and, of course, mistakes, can be organised to strengthen and develop the struggle of the whole class is ignored.

LO's intervention in the railway strike movement of October 2007 followed from its general approach to the class struggle. While supporting the movement, LO refused to put forward any concrete demand on the union leaders for a general strike, or any concrete slogan to help the workers organise in rank and file coordinations to keep control of their struggles. Before the big strikes, an LO editorial warned:

"A day of strike as on 18 October, even if successful will not be enough to make them [the bosses] give in. However, it should be a warning to the bosses and the government and at the same time an incitement to the trade unions to foresee and announce the next action".<sup>1</sup>

On the eve of the crucial day of action on 20 November, LO's newspaper criticised the union leaders who had chosen to go for separate actions but it concluded with more optimistic musings.

"However, the workers have many times shown in the past that their combativity can be stronger than the hesitations of the union leaderships and can impose on them to go further. It is in the interest of all the workers that this time again things take this course."<sup>2</sup>

We say, frankly, that such politics stops where revolutionary politics begins. The clear betrayal of the trade union leaders is only diplomatically alluded to. How should the workers organise to respond to this betrayal? How can they struggle,



how can they win? The very term “coordination” never gets a mention despite the fact that LO itself organised such bodies of railway workers in the 1980s and that LO members were indeed organising metro workers in Paris against the trade union leaders this time, too. In short, LO refuses to give a political leadership to the vanguard of the working class by stating clearly and explicitly what needs to be done.

Yet, very occasionally, unchanging LO does take an initiative, but usually quickly comes to regret it. Thus, after Arlette Laguiller's better than usual electoral result in 1995, 5.30 per cent, LO briefly toyed with the idea of calling for a new workers' party. It dropped the idea like a hot potato almost immediately, despite (or because) of its positive reception on the left. This retreat, however, contributed to a split by over 100 militants to form the *Voix des Travailleurs* group which eventually joined the LCR as a faction. A recent break by LO from its routine, this time that of never calling for a vote for the PS (since 1981 when it did call for a vote for Mitterrand in the second round), has led to another split.

Following Arlette Laguiller's appallingly low score in the first round of the 2007 presidential elections, 1.33 per cent, compared her score of 5.72 per cent in 2002, a loss of two thirds of its voters, LO was badly shaken. It was left with a campaign debt of €1.4 million. To add insult to injury, the LCR's candidate Olivier Besancenot got 4.08 per cent, not only beating Arlette's score by 3 to 1 but also trouncing Marie-George Buffet (*Parti communiste français*) and José Bové, the “unity of the left” candidate.

But it gets worse. Faced with stagnation, or even a drop, in its membership and with these election results, the LO

leadership has decided on a desperate solution: a dramatic move rightwards towards common slates with the reformist parties in the next round of local elections. In a situation where the PS and PCF are deeply discredited and incapable of mounting any serious resistance to Sarkozy, not least because many of their leaders are actually in favour of neoliberal reforms, LO's move is utter madness.

It also flatly contradicts the historical LO line of avoiding any contact with PS, indeed, they have treated reformism as a contagious illness, to be avoided at all costs, often drawing the sectarian conclusion that revolutionaries should not place united front demands on the big reformist parties. Only a few months ago, LO harshly criticised LCR for campaigning together with PS leaders for the No Campaign of the Left (not withstanding the LCR's tendency to opportunism, this was a perfectly legitimate and correct campaign).

Now, however, they propose a dramatic u-turn to form lists together with many of these same leaders and to even share the responsibility for their reformist policy applied at the local level. The reason for this? LO has decided that only elected officials can give them more visibility, contacts, and greater possibility of local activity. In short, their reasons express a shamelessly reformist attitude to party building. The move has not gone without reverberations within LO. The long standing public opposition, who had a monthly column in the paper, have been effectively expelled for opposing it – suspended by the party until the December 2008 congress with their regular column curtailed. The opposition, said to number somewhere between 100 and 150 members, have called it a *de facto* expulsion.

## LCR: FOR A NEW PARTY?

Since the mid 1990s the LCR and its supporters in the Fourth International have been chiefly characterised by deep pessimism about the goal of building a revolutionary party of socialist revolution. Indeed, after 1991, they concluded that the “epoch of October [1917] is over”, along with the immediate importance of the dichotomy between reform and revolution in terms of building working class parties. The task of period, they argue, is the “recomposition” of the workers' movement, that is, to rebuild it together with the workers, youth, groups, trade unions and parties opposed to neoliberalism and struggling against it. An early supporter of the anticapitalist movement with the “Euromarches” of 1997 (Amsterdam) and 1999 (Cologne), the LCR certainly does not suffer from the rigid sectarian economism of LO. Nevertheless, for the LCR, unity in the anticapitalist movement always meant dropping important aspects of the revolutionary programme, and never calling on reformist leaderships, be that in the trade unions, the European Left Party in the European Social Forum, or Lula's supporters in the World Social Forum, to go further than they were willing to do at any given moment.

Despite the LCR's view that the “broad parties” that they propose should not be identified as either reformist or revolutionary, in truth, this means a strategic orientation to the building of new reformist parties. Reflecting this, their leading theorists have revised key elements of classical Marxism, such as the theory of the state<sup>3</sup> and re-elaborated notions of Gramscian hegemony derived from the Eurocommunists of the 1970s. Central tenets of bolshevism, like the dictatorship of proletariat or the workers' councils as basis of the workers' state, were abandoned in favour of utopian half-way house solutions like the coexistence of workers' council with a parliamentary assembly.<sup>4</sup> While these ideas about the tasks of the period and party building are not codified in a well-defined form and there is a whole spectrum of different positions deriving from them according to different tendencies inside LCR, they constitute nevertheless their basic guiding principles. Moreover, the LCR's deeply ingrained opportunism means it can twist this very flexible schema to justify almost any tactical orientation, be it towards leftward developments in work-

ers and youth struggles or electoral alliances.

In the 1990s, the LCR frantically searched for a major reformist partner with whom it could fuse. These were the years when the Stalinist left was still politically and numerically strong but was going through a period of decline and crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union. For years, the Fourth International's textbook example of this new tactic was Italy's Rifondazione Comunista, in which their section remained a tendency from its foundation in the early 1990s until just a few months ago. While this tactic was also "successfully" applied by many of its sister organisations (in Mexico, Spain and Portugal) to the point that some of them are now almost extinct, the LCR's wooing was in vain. Neither the PCF nor the Green Party were willing to fuse with a relatively large and coherent group that could have had a serious impact in a joint organisation. Nevertheless, in the "regroupment" years after 1995, the LCR swallowed up a split from LO as well as other small centrist groups. More importantly, it correctly oriented to the workers' struggles and to the new movements against globalisation. By the mid-years of the new decade, it had a fresh look with its new presidential candidate figure Olivier Besancenot, who has become very popular beyond the far left and is surrounded by an aura of sympathy even in traditionally hostile milieux, including the hardline Stalinists at the *Fête de l'Humanité*, for instance.

Despite strong numerical growth, the LCR's overall strategy of party building was far from clear, even to its own leadership. The majority wavered between two tactics: electoral alliances with LO (as was the case in 2004) on one side, and a search for partners on the left of PS and with the PCF on the other. These two orientations are embodied in semi-permanent tendencies inside the party. The first, called Plateforme 2, represents the "left" of LCR and is composed mainly of the 1997 split from LO (VDT). The second, whose main leader is Christian Piquet, constantly orients towards "unity of the left" and actively promotes left reformism.

Until the end of 2006, the LCR was still attempting to stitch together a party with left reformist forces. This included ATTAC (acronym for *Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l'Aide*

*aux Citoyens* – Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), sectors around the left trade union SUD, and José Bové of the Confédération paysanne (the radical farmers' movement). The belief that this goal was actually within the LCR's reach came with the 2005 No Campaign of the Left, where several hundred collectives were formed across the whole country, mobilising thousands of members from PCF, ATTAC and LCR, plus Bové's supporters, as well as some old members, sympathisers and contacts of the LCR. With an approaching presidential election campaign, the LCR leadership wanted to cement this alliance around a common "unitary" candidate. This dream collapsed in a disastrous shambles for two reasons.

Firstly, ATTAC exploded in a scandal over rigged internal elections. For an organisation whose motto was "to make politics differently" (meaning in a clean way) this was a mortal deathblow. Then the PCF manoeuvred to have its candidate, Marie-George Buffet, crowned candidate of this whole movement, but leaving the PCF with its hands free to negotiate ministerial posts in a future PS government. To achieve its goal, the PCF shamelessly packed the selection meetings of the collectives with its supporters and pushed through the nomination of Buffet. But it rejected the LCR's correct proposal that any candidate should refuse to participate in a government with the PS. The LCR quite rightly refused to submit to this coup d'état. Thus, the PCF did for the collectives: instead of a single "unitary" candidate, the disunited left presented three candidates: Olivier Besancenot, Marie-George Buffet and a last minute entrant, laughably claiming to "unite" the movement, José Bové.

The LCR was comforted by the fact that Besancenot collected more votes than Buffet, Laguiller and Bové put together! He appeared to the radicalised workers and youth, correctly enough, as the candidate closest to their struggles and promising not to betray them by taking part in a neoliberal government with PS. Flushed by their success and encouraged by the warm response to Besancenot at mass election rallies, the LCR felt that they needed to take a new initiative. In June 2007, Besancenot issued a call for a new anticapitalist party. This is an unusual move for the LCR. Instead of adapting to a section of the existing reformist lead-

ership, they assigned themselves a leading role. Later, the LCR clarified its plan to build the new party for the defence of the interest of the workers and based on an anticapitalist programme. It proposes that anticapitalists regroup in this party, "rooted in the youth, the workplaces, the public sector and the working class areas, to build the mobilisations of today, which should prepare a radical, revolutionary change in society."

While the new party is to be many things – "Guevarist", "Feminist", "Ecologist", etc. – the LCR have insisted that it should not be Trotskyist or Leninist. Indeed, they seem to be proposing a minimum/maximum programme, that is, a series of left reformist demands combined with a call for a new socialist, anticapitalist society. In doing so, they tacitly drop the transitional method, as developed by the Communist International in its early years and then more fully by Leon Trotsky. Trotsky argued that demands like workers' control of production, and a mass workers' militia, are key elements of the communist programme because they challenge the rule of capital; they can be won in high periods of struggle but fundamentally destabilise capitalist class rule, and pose the breaking up of the old state machine and a revolutionary seizure of power by the working class.

Despite their apparent enthusiasm, the LCR's first steps towards implementing their policy have been timid and faltering. Despite a major strike wave that mobilised hundred of thousands of workers and students across the country, no major series of meetings or launch conferences for such a party project have taken place. Instead, each local branch has been left to take its own initiative or not: in many cases they had no clue how to proceed! At a national level, the move towards a new party is far from being enthusiastically accepted and a sizeable minority tendency within the LCR is publicly and vociferously opposed to it.

Since Sarkozy's election, the LCR has correctly called for social resistance against his reactionary programme. It has denounced the class character of his measures and has rightly addressed all the social sectors that will be hit by his politics: workers, youth, immigrants. In October and November 2007, in the middle of the first big battle, *Rouge*, LCR's newspaper, correctly called for a generalised mobilisation: "Let us build the

social fightback", "Pursue, generalise to win", "Unity on strike", "Convergence is necessary". LCR's position was against negotiations, for a broadening of the struggle to bring in other sectors and for an unlimited strike. Finally, the call for a new party is put in the context of the wider political struggle against Sarkozy; we need a new party to win this struggle.

However, behind these entirely correct positions it is striking to note that LCR politics is lacking any concrete implementation. How can we generalise the struggle? Around what demands? How can we organise ourselves to take control of the strike out of the hands of the union bureaucrats? Simple and clear slogans like "unlimited general strike", "build strike committees and coordinations", not to speak of self-defence and workers' militias, are all noticeable only by their absence. In this respect, LCR is mainly responding to the mounting mobilisation by simply transmitting politically the existing ideas and consciousness of the broad, quite politically heterogeneous vanguard who want to fight Sarkozy. Clearly the role of a revolutionary party would be to help this vanguard to take the next steps, warn it of the betrayal of the union bureaucrats and give it the concrete political and organisational means to fight back.

For the moment, the LCR's emphasis, which is closely related to their new party proposal, is to assemble an electoral umbrella for the March 2008 local elections, hardly a decisive occasion for workers attacked on so many fronts by the government! Indeed, left to its own initiative, it is difficult to believe that LCR is capable of preparing anything better than a new, left reformist party. Ultimately, its perspective is for incremental increases in electoral support over a long period.

Ultimately, then, the LCR do not see what György Lukács characterised as marking V.I. Lenin's method, "the actuality of the revolution", that is, its objective possibility, its potentiality in the struggles taking place against Sarkozy today. As we continuously re-iterate, a new party is urgently needed to fight for a revolutionary programme to generalise each of these struggles and force a major confrontation between the government and the streets. Nevertheless, the LCR's initiative, opening a debate on the need for a new party, must be welcomed insofar as it is quite openly calling for a split between the vanguard of the working class and the

wretched leadership of the PCF and PS. In the context of anger and revolts against the government, and a continuously rightward moving PS, the LCR initiative, if it is pursued with vigour, could well attract many thousands of workers and youth. Such a movement for a new party could be an important arena of struggle for a revolutionary programme and a Leninist combat party in the period ahead.

### CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

In the autumn, the betrayal of the trade union leaders not only sent the working class down to defeat over public sector pensions, but also encouraged the demobilisation of the students who launched occupations and protests opposing the beginnings of privatisation in higher education. This spring, Sarkozy buoyed up by his autumn victories, has pressed on with his offensive. The attacks on the "special regimes" pensions were passed into law on 16 January – even though negotiations were still underway at the state electricity and railway companies. However, despite this setback, workers have continued to mobilise. On 24 January, a quarter of French public sector workers participated in the day of action on wages, against a background of rising inflation, and in opposition to the 22,900 public sector job cuts planned for this year. While smaller than the November demonstrations, these nevertheless showed the continued willingness of workers to fight.

The trade unions leaders have typically enough continued their acts of betrayal. In discussions with the state, the major trade unions accepted government plans for a massive increase in "flexibilisation", or *précarité*, in French labour laws. The heart of the package was the introduction of a "fixed length contract" (the CDD) that is strikingly similar to the CPE (first job contract). In the first 18 to 36 months of employment, the employer may sack the worker with a severance package worth just 10 per cent of his or her annual pay. While the CPE only applied to young workers, the CDD will effect workers young and old. All the major trade union federations have accepted it and it will now be debated in the National Assembly. Only the CGT withdrew its support at the last minute, knowing that it would still be sent to the National Assembly if it had the backing of the other unions.

Once again, the response of the leaderships of the trade unions shows the profound crisis of leadership afflicting the French working class. The size and scale of workers' and students' mobilisations is impressive, but will not indefinitely survive a series of such defeats. At the same time, the far left is going through a period of quite fundamental change. The LO has lurched rightwards and suffered a split while the LCR marches slowly towards a new party, with a large section of its membership openly opposed to this radical new policy and continuing to cling to the old perspective of regrouping with the PCF.

In this situation, we propose the following to those workers and leftists in France who realise the opportunity that exists in the current crisis to forge a revolutionary party and the urgency to take up this struggle. Our starting point is the conviction that a revolutionary party can be built in the period ahead, providing we have the boldness to explain what this means to workers and youth fighting Sarkozy. Doing so means rearming the working class with the political weapons it needs to fight the trade union bureaucracy in the coming struggles. Persistent agitation for democratic organs of working class struggle, strike committees, local, regional and national coordinations, will be essential to wrestle control of the struggle from the trade union bureaucracy. At the same time, we should take the same struggle into the unions themselves, fighting for a movement of the rank and file to transform the unions and dissolve the parasitic union bureaucracy. Lastly, we should support all initiatives towards a new working class party, while at the same time fighting openly for a re-elaborated, revolutionary action programme.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 *Lutte Ouvrier*, Editorial 12/10/2007
- 2 *Lutte Ouvrier* Editorial, 16/11/2007
- 3 Cooper, L., *Daniel Bensaid and the Return of Strategy*, [www.fifthinternational.org](http://www.fifthinternational.org)
- 4 Cooper, *ibid*

# Problems of the Venezuelan Revolution

*An exchange of views between the League for the Fifth International and the Comité impulsor del Partido de la Revolución Socialista*

The year 2007 was one of highs and lows for Hugo Chávez. It started with the launch of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, or PSUV), which rapidly claimed that 5.7 million people had signed up to join it. Yet by the end of the year Chávez suffered his first electoral defeat, in the referendum on changes to the Bolivarian constitution.

These changes would have strengthened his presidential powers, though they also contained limited reforms and vague pledges to socialism. The economic and political background was also less favourable: with rising prices and food shortages and friction between the Bolivarian state and workers in struggle, such as those at the Sanitarios Maracay ceramics factory, currently operating under workers' control.

Throughout 2007 increasing conflict was developing between Chávez and the trade unions. Earlier in 2007 Chávez, true to his populism, had attacked "the idea that workers and unions are central to the revolution", saying the barrio communal councils (consejos comunales) were central. On another occasion he declared that "unions should not be autonomous - one must put a stop to that."

Less people voted for Chávez in the referendum than the for his new party. The figures - 50.7 per cent against the amendments, and 49.29 per cent for them, on a low, 55.61 per cent turnout - show that the right wing opposition has hardly grown in support since the 2006 presidential election. However, Chávez lost nearly three million votes compared with that result. The defeat has opened up a new phase in the Venezuelan revolution - one where the hitherto pro-Chávez urban poor and working class are looking more critically at the comrade Presidente, looking for deeds not fine words.

However, the creation of the PSUV split the left between those willing to join Chávez' new party and those who believed

it was necessary to maintain their organisational and political independence. This included the forces of the Trotskyist left, even those very critical of Chávez. In particular the Partido de la Revolución Socialista (PRS) split into a wing led by Orlando Chirino, the national coordinator of the Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT) and another, around Stalin Perez Borges, also a prominent leader of the UNT. Chirino was sacked from his job in the Venezuelan national oil company - PDVSA - in December, a clear case of victimisation that all socialists should protest against, demanding his unconditional and immediate re-instatement.

The Stalin Perez group has joined the PSUV, calling on workers to organise "battalions" (local party branches) in barrios and workplaces, and join the PSUV with "our syndicalist and socialist proposals... and our ideas about how to construct a democratic organisation". The Stalin Perez group argues that it is fighting for working-class independence and for a revolutionary socialist programme within the PSUV, though the Chirino group claims that their publications since entry are grossly opportunist in their formulations and, that they present themselves simply as a left wing within Chavismo.

The referendum seems to have finalised the split, with the Stalin Perez group calling for a "yes" vote in the 2 December referendum and the Chirino group calling for a blank vote.

Hitherto, Orlando Chirino and Stalin Perez were leaders of the largest faction within the UNT - CCURA (Corriente Clasista, Unitaria, Revolucionaria, Autónoma, or Autonomous, Revolutionary, United Class Current). They faced the FSBT (Fuerza Socialista Bolivariano de Trabajadores or Workers' Socialist Bolivarian Force), which is a strongly pro-Chávez and bureaucratic current. CCURA has vigorously defended the UNT's autonomy. Now arguments

have broken out over whether to broaden the UNT to attract unions linked to the old CTV (Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela). The conflict could also lead to a split in the CCURA faction in the UNT.

On the political terrain the Orlando Chirino grouping has launched the Movement for a Workers Party (Movimiento por la construcción de un partido de los trabajadores) with a paper Voz de los Trabajadores (Workers Voice), claiming 15,000 workers have signed up so far.

The International Secretariat of the League for the Fifth International wrote to the PRS after one of our militants established contact with Orlando Chirino and Stalin Perez during a visit to Venezuela in summer 2007, before the split but when the differences were already developing. Our comrade had very interesting discussions with both these comrades. It was in the light of this that we wrote a letter to the PRS, again before the split, which we print below.

The rapid response which this drew from the leadership of the Movement for a Workers Party (Orlando Chirino and his comrades) showed a serious attempt to grapple with the complexities of the issues raised by the revolutionary situation in Venezuela. Where we did have disagreements over tactical issues (the entry tactic into the PSUV, which we favour, and the reasoning behind their call for an abstention in the referendum campaign), the comrades demonstrated that they were willing to consider the methodology of these tactics and further discuss the issues. The letter also expresses an interest in international collaboration and discussion.

A positive dialogue with leaders of a militant wing of the Venezuelan working class is to be welcomed and is, we believe, of interest to wider sections of the left. That is why we print here what we hope will prove an ongoing and fruitful correspondence.

# *To the comrades of the PRS from the League for the Fifth International*

**T**he revolutionary events in your country over the last five years or so are of extraordinary importance to working class militants all over the world. The very fact that the overthrow of capitalism, the destruction of the capitalist state and the construction of socialism are being debated by huge numbers of workers and the urban poor is of enormous importance. It shows that the formation of a workers' government, based on the armed people, can be accomplished in Venezuela if there is a revolutionary outcome to the struggles ahead. This depends crucially on the Venezuelan working class achieving organised political class independence, i.e. a revolutionary party. A Venezuelan socialist revolution can be a first step in the struggle for a socialist federation of Latin America and world socialist revolution.

We know you share this goal and we wish to discuss with you the strategy and tactics that revolutionaries need to adopt in order to achieve it. In this letter we outline our thinking on the crisis in Venezuela and the way forward for the left. We know you have different views among yourselves on strategic and tactical questions facing the left, and would welcome responses to this letter from either side of the current debate on the PSUV. In the analysis and positions we outline below, we know there is much you will agree on, but we wanted, in this opening letter, to state the "totality" of our view, including those aspects that are uncontroversial, in order to ensure the greatest possible clarity in our exchange.

Before we outline our thoughts on revolutionary strategy in Venezuela, we must first thank you for the hospitality you showed our comrade our comrade during his stay at the beginning of September. If one of your comrades wants to travel to Europe, of course she/he would be very welcome anytime and we will do our very best to support her/him in a similarly generous manner! We, like all the many left organisations, social movements and activists, have been discussing extensively the crisis in

Venezuela. Our discussion is now much more informed thanks to the knowledge you have helped our comrade develop during his visit, which he has, of course, since shared with the League. Lastly, we express our solidarity with your work in Venezuela and the class struggle trade union federation you have built in the struggles of the last years. We think that the UNT as a whole, and the "classista current" (CCURA) in particular, represent very important achievements, which would not have been possible without your work. Your victorious struggle against the trade union bureaucracy has opened up a new period for Venezuelan workers organised in the UNT.

## **VENEZUELA IN A PRO- LONGED REVOLUTION- ARY SITUATION**

The government of Chávez is the product of the class struggle by the Venezuelan masses over the last years. As such, Chávez must be defended against any attacks by US imperialism and the old Venezuelan élite of landowners and capitalists. Nevertheless, he will not lead Venezuela into a genuine socialist revolution because, in the final analysis, he defends the private property of the capitalists. Chávez relies on the bourgeois state (army, police, bureaucracy) and has no intention of smashing it. Certainly, he has had to mobilise and partially arm the masses to help ensure that he himself does not fall victim to the bourgeois elements in the army leadership. He has talked about replacing the capitalist state machine with a popular one based on militias and communal councils but this is a smokescreen. His ideology is a left nationalism, based above all on the idea of using the national oil reserves to the benefit of "the people". His government has consistently sought to slow down, manage and soften the biggest class conflicts in Venezuela and doesn't encourage the workers to seize the private property of the capitalists. On the contrary, it opposes the workers' movement and even attacks workers with police forces.

We believe that the Chávez government is a left-bonapartist government, an example of "bonapartism sui generis" as Trotsky described the regime of Cárdenas in México in 1937. The socialist revolution will have to be made against Chávez, not with him.

However, although we should reject any idea that Chávez and his left bonapartist regime could bring us "21st century socialism", we must not make the mistake of concluding from the non-revolutionary, bourgeois character of the government that Venezuela is not in a revolutionary situation. On the contrary, Venezuela is in a prolonged and deep revolutionary crisis. The bonapartist regime has lost the support of the ruling class, but yet remains at the head of the bourgeois state. It is therefore repeatedly compelled to seek the mobilisation of the people to resist bourgeois reaction. The social welfare reforms brought in by the regime have, of course, won it significant support from the masses, but their maintenance is dependent on continued oil revenues. Moreover, the struggles in Venezuela have created a long term radicalisation of the masses, who now desperately yearn for a genuine, anti-capitalist socialist transformation that does away with the old bourgeoisie. For all these reasons the Chávez government is inherently unstable.

## **FOR A VANGUARD PARTY UNITED ON A REVOLUTIONARY PRO- GRAMME**

The destiny of the Venezuelan revolution is dependent on whether a revolutionary party that can succeed in leading the masses qualitatively beyond "Chavismo", and to Bolshevism, can be built. Only if the workers, the farmers, the oppressed and exploited realize that they must expropriate the capitalists, native and imperialist, as a class, smash their state and replace it by a workers' state, will the revolution have a future. Thus, the task of revolutionaries must be to build a revolutionary party, which

constitutes a clear and open alternative to "Chavismo". This historical task is in your hands. It poses enormous questions of revolutionary tactics and strategy in the late imperialist epoch.

In your struggles of the last years, you have made great strides forward in building a radical, class struggle trade union. Despite the divisions amongst the far left in Venezuela on the PSUV, it is our view that the unity of the CCURA can be maintained on the basis of exemplary internal workers' democracy, absolute independence from the state and continued militant class struggle against the employers and their government. A confused split in CCURA would mean a defeat for the Venezuelan revolution and a victory for the bureaucracy. In our opinion, neither the split in the PSR nor any differences over the attitude to the PSUV should automatically lead to such a split.

However, the task of building a revolutionary party goes beyond the perspective of building a combative class struggle trade union. To subordinate this political task to even the most militant trade unionism will lead to disaster. Indeed, the crucial political questions must be taken up vigorously in the trade unions. The question is: how can we link the economic struggles of the vanguard; of the oil workers, the colleagues from Sanitarios Maracay, Toyota, Coca Cola etc.; to the perspective of creating a revolutionary party of the mass vanguard forces in Venezuela? How can the combative trade unionist consciousness of the progressive workers be raised even higher, to a political class-consciousness, via the creation of a revolutionary party that embraces the vanguard of all aspects of the class struggle in Venezuela and offers a lead to the proletariat across your continent and, indeed, worldwide?

## THE REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAMME IN VENEZUELA TODAY

For us, the answers to these questions lie in the experience of the Russian Revolution, and the programmatic documents of the Third and Fourth Internationals prior to their degeneration and collapse. They, of course, shared the same strategic concerns as we have today; how can the daily struggle of workers be turned towards the struggle for power? As Trotsky argued in the Transitional Programme, we should not

"discard the program of the old "minimal" demands to the extent that they retain their vital force... Indefatigably... [we] defend... the democratic rights and social conquests of the workers. But... [we carry] ... on this day-to-day work within the framework of the correct actual, that is, revolutionary perspective... [we] advance... a system of transitional demands, the essence of which is contained in the fact that ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very bases of the bourgeois regime" (Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Programme*, 1938).

By developing and re-elaborating Trotsky's transitional method we can link the immediate, economic struggles of the working class, to the struggle for proletarian power. In short, we must fight in Venezuela for the completion of the revolution. This necessitates i) winning the working class to the principle of class independence from the state through the building of its own democratic organs of power, independent of the Bolivarian state; ii) struggling for the immediate expropriation of the bourgeoisie; iii) breaking the illusions of the masses in Chávez and winning them to a perspective of proletarian, class independence.

Therefore, we propose the following "key slogans" for revolutionaries in Venezuela:

- In all institutions set up by the "Bolivarian Revolution" we fight for democratic demands - free and unrestricted elections of all officials and their immediate recallability
- For an action programme to deal with low wages, unemployment and poverty, aimed at finally eradicating ill health, illiteracy, the oppression of women, the youth, etc. Rank and file workers active in the *missiones* must be free to help draw up this programme which must be paid for by taxation of the rich and confiscation of their property
- For workers' control in the factories and the immediate expropriation of the bourgeoisie
- For an independent working class militia, free of presidential and state tutelage, electing its own officers and commanders
- For democratic rights for the army rank and file to organise independently of their officers
- For democratic councils in the facto-

ries and poor communities, linked up with city, regional and national councils

- The land to all those who work on it. Confiscation of the big ranches and foreign agribusinesses and their management by workers' and peasants' collectives
- For a sovereign national congress of delegates chosen by the workers, urban poor, and peasants.
- For a workers' and peasants' government

## THE PSUV AND THE ENTRYISM QUESTION

The struggle for a revolutionary party and its programme must be taken to the masses. To win the masses to break from Chávez, and to an independent, revolutionary proletarian policy for the completion of the revolution, we must avoid the twin pitfalls of opportunism and sectarianism. Chávez and his entourage have designed the PSUV to be a means of controlling the revolution, to stop it expropriating the bourgeoisie and establishing a proletarian state. We cannot have any false hopes that the PSUV, under the leadership of Chávez, will be an instrument of the revolution. We equally cannot entrust the fate of the revolution and its positive development to any "revolutionary process" or the spontaneous militancy of the masses. Against both these perspectives, we assert the need for a revolutionary party, to fight for a revolutionary programme.

Just as we should not confuse the bourgeois leadership of Chávez with the revolutionary character of the situation in Venezuela, equally we should not mistake the bourgeois programme he advances in the PSUV with the ideas and aspirations of the mass forces coming into the party. As you are aware, millions of Venezuelan workers and poor have signed up to this party. It is having a debate on the programme needed to win "21st century socialism". We strongly urge you - and as many members of CCURA as possible - to enter this party and fight for it to be founded on a revolutionary programme. We believe it would be sectarian to abstain from joining the party at this critical moment. It would mean losing the opportunity to win support amongst the masses for a revolutionary socialist programme to complete the revolution.

We believe that this entry should be

undertaken in the manner advocated by Lenin in the 1920s (the British Labour Party) and Trotsky in the 1930s (the French and USA Socialist Parties). This would include an open fight for a revolutionary programme, not the so-called entryism *sui generis*, sponsored by Michel Pablo in the Fourth International after 1951, in which revolutionaries disguised themselves as reformists or centrists. Such a revolutionary entry tactic does not presume that the party entered has some sort of inherent capacity either to make the revolution or take it forward a whole stage. It requires only that it contain mass forces that the revolutionary vanguard needs to win in order to become a real force, something stronger than a mere propaganda group.

It might be objected - with some justice - that the PSUV is much nearer to a populist 'anti-imperialist' party than a reformist workers' party but this is not decisive when it comes to the tactic of entryism. In 1922-3, the still revolutionary Comintern advised the Chinese Communist Party, then only some 400 strong, to enter the Guomintang (Kuomintang) that was just such a populist party. They entered formally as individual members, though in reality they maintained their party organisation. Trotsky is, of course, remembered for his insistence on the political and organisational independence of the CCP in 1926. By that time, largely through the entry tactic, it had grown to 60,000 members who were playing leading roles in the mass strikes and peasant land occupations and the representatives of the Chinese bourgeoisie in the Guomintang had demonstrably turned to the right. At this point, Trotsky correctly objected that clinging to a "permanent entry" tactic meant political submission of the CP to the bourgeoisie, which indeed had completely disastrous consequences in the next two years. But precisely then he stated:

"The participation of the CCP in the Kuomintang was perfectly correct in the period when the CCP was a propaganda society which was only preparing itself for future independent political activity but which at the same time, sought to take part in the ongoing national liberation struggle" (The Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang, September 27 1926).

The PSUV is certainly an instrument intended by Chávez to control and incor-

porate the working class and thus prevent a proletarian revolution. The question is how to prevent him being successful in this. We believe that it is best to do so inside the party, before it has fully crystallised into a bureaucratic populist party. The more class conscious and organised workers carry out this entryism, the more it should be possible to win widespread support for their practical programmatic and organisational proposals.

We recognise that the fight for this revolutionary programme and for inner party democracy would be a struggle against Chávez and his bourgeois supporters. They are counterrevolutionary forces that have at the moment a much stronger organised expression than the forces of the revolution and they are conscious of their goals. They include the state (military and political) bureaucracy and the trade union sections that support Chávez. Their intention is to make the PSUV from the outset an instrument to control the masses and to consolidate a bureaucracy within it. Their aim is to form, not a workers' party, but a "people's party" i.e. a bourgeois party. But they have not yet won this struggle.

The Chávez-controlled apparatus of the PSUV cannot yet fully control the party. Thousands of branches, with around one million militants, are impossible to control completely. They can be the arenas for a struggle against Chávez and for a revolutionary programme. But we should not have the illusion that we will be able to change the character of the PSUV peacefully. Indeed, our perspective from the outset is that the PSUV will split on class lines, i.e. a split with the Chávez leadership. We should fight for the maximum, working class unity around a revolutionary programme of demands. You have an excellent opportunity to encourage radical trade union militants to enter the PSUV and to fight within it for a revolutionary programme, seeking to win support from the broader layers of the poor and oppressed that are attracted to the party.

As is suggested by this approach, we believe it would be fatal to adjust our programme to what is acceptable to the PSUV leadership. The work in the PSUV must never have the aim of avoiding a conflict with the bureaucracy. On the contrary, such a struggle with Chávez is the very aim of entry! From the outset, we should fight for full democratic rights

for minorities and factions within the party. We should fight for a democratic debate over the programme of the party, in which we must put forward a full, revolutionary programme, and for a democratic conference to decide on the programme.

Will Chávez tolerate an open, combative revolutionary opposition in the PSUV for long? Certainly not - such a struggle would quickly bring the bureaucratic weight of the PSUV apparatus to bear on the revolutionary forces. However, if the revolutionary elements are prevented from joining the PSUV, or are expelled from it by the bureaucracy, this will itself be a powerful weapon that revolutionaries can use to win support from the masses. It throws the responsibility for disunity of the class and anti-imperialist forces onto Chávez. It deprives him of the demagogic argument that the revolutionaries are splitting the forces opposed to the imperialists and the Venezuelan elite. What better opportunity exists at present to show the masses the real character of the Chávez government? Which better possibility exists to take the most combative elements with you out of the process of the PSUV's formation and thus come out stronger?

We think that the current situation can lay the foundations of a revolutionary party which is not merely a propaganda group of dozens or hundreds - even a militant one with a genuine leading role in the unions - but a real party of the mass vanguard. Only such a party can challenge for the leadership of the Venezuelan revolution. Such a Leninist combat party is urgently needed. The PSUV certainly won't be this party! But we think that a revolutionary entry tactic can help lay the basis for such a party - although time is of the essence. If we wait outside the PSUV too long it will become consolidated behind the bourgeois leadership and programme of Chávez. This, revolutionary, entry tactic neither puts revolutionaries outside of the process of the PSUV nor forces them to adjust their programme to it.

There is one other issue that we believe needs to be raised, the widespread talk about "following the Cuban Road", coming from Stalinists and even from some who call themselves Trotskyists. In our view, even if it were possible, this model would mean the prior subordination of the working class to an all-powerful bureaucracy, hostile to workers'

council democracy and the right of workers to choose which party they believe best represents their class interests. Even if a bureaucratic regime were to expropriate the capitalists, there would be no workers' control, no democratic planned economy and no workers' council democracy. Such a state would be an obstacle to the development of the workers' state towards socialism, which in any case can only be built on an international, continental, global scale. In addition, the Cuban Road would not lead to international revolution but to the dead end of trying to build socialism in one country. In the 21st century, in the period of globalisation, this would have even more disastrous and reactionary consequences than it had in the twentieth century.

The eyes of all of us are focused on the revolution in Venezuela. We write you this letter with all due respect for your greater knowledge of your own terrain and experience of fighting in the workers' movement. Nevertheless, we believe that internationalism for Trotskyists must be based on giving our opinions clearly and frankly. We hope that the revolutionary forces in Venezuela are enormously strengthened in the coming months and years. We also urge you to extend your struggle to the call for a new revolutionary international. A socialist revolution in Venezuela would be a huge victory for the world working class and an enormous blow to the imperialist system.

**In international solidarity,  
International Secretariat,  
League for the Fifth International**

## *To the comrades of the LFI from the Comité impulsor del Partido de la Revolución Socialista*

**I**t was very pleasant for us to receive your appraisal of the extraordinary political process taking place here in Venezuela. Despite the distance and differences in culture and language, you have made the effort to give an analysis in the best traditions of Marxism and Trotskyism.

We value this huge effort and feel obliged to take part in this exchange of ideas which you propose, which undoubtedly will result in closer relations and more political collaboration between our organizations at both a national and international level.

Before proceeding to express our opinions about your political analysis, we would like to tell you that this letter was written by the group of comrades which did not enter the PSUV, and who stand for the independence and autonomy of the trade union movement with respect to the state, the government and the bosses, and whose task for the immediate future is the creation of a Workers Party (Partido de los Trabajadores was capitalised) and who identify ourselves as activists for International Workers Unity – Fourth International (Unidad Internacional de los Trabajadores – Cuarta Internacional<sup>1</sup>).

### **REGARDING YOUR POLITICAL CHARACTERISATION**

After studying your document we found great similarities between us, which led us to believe that despite the tactical differences over entering the PSUV and the characteristics of the constitutional reform, which we will go into later, we have the same conceptual understanding of the political definitions of what is happening in Venezuela.

These similarities are important if we take into account that many of those groups which call themselves trotskyist and revolutionary do not share same analysis of the situation both you and we do. For example, here are some of the things you said which we agree with, and which mark you out from other groups:

a. That Venezuela is going through a revolutionary situation (we took it for granted that

when you said that Venezuela is in a “prolonged and deep revolutionary crisis”, that you were referring to a “deep revolutionary situation”, different to the category of a “revolutionary crisis” which implies a power vacuum.

b. Regarding the bourgeois, left-bonapartist and not-revolutionary character of the Chávez government, which implies that the socialist revolution will need to take place in opposition to him and not alongside him.

c. Rejection of the idea that Chávez and his government can bring “21st century socialism”

d. That the success of the Venezuelan revolution depends on the creation of a revolutionary party which can lead the masses qualitatively beyond “Chavismo” and towards bolshevism. The revolution will only be successful if the workers, the peasantry, the oppressed and the exploited understand the need to expropriate the capitalists, domestic and imperialist, and overthrow the bourgeois state, replacing it with a workers state; and that therefore revolutionaries must build a revolutionary party, openly proposing an alternative to “Chavismo”.

e. The need to be alongside the masses and convince them of the need to break with Chávez and to join us in order to fight for independent representations, revolutionary and classist, and capable of completing the revolution, avoiding both sectarianism and opportunism.

f. That Chávez has created the PSUV with the aim of controlling the revolution, avoiding the expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the creation of a workers state. Like you, we do not imagine that the PSUV, under the leadership of Chávez, will be an instrument of the revolution. He PSUV will never be this party!

As you can see, the similarities regarding our definitions of the political situation in the country, the character of the government and the Venezuelan political regime, the role of Chávez and the PSUV and the necessity of building a working class party, are fundamental agreements and shared principals, which allow us and oblige us to seek further dialogue with you,

to keep debating with you, and above all to look at taking part in united actions between our organisations.

After recognising that we have a similar analysis of what is happening in Venezuela, we would like to know how you view the dynamic of the government, as even though we do indeed agree that it is bourgeois left-bonapartist government or "sui generis" as Trotsky said, in that it rests on the masses in order to confront the US government, we also view the dynamic or the tendency of the government as ever more towards a classic bonapartist and even reactionary government, due to political compromises with certain sectors of the bourgeoisie and of imperialism (especially European, Asian and as represented by the US Democrat Party), and an increasing distance from the mass movement. We base this definition on the actions of the government immediately before and after the referendum defeat of December 2.

The question of the dynamic of the regime is vital, as the rest of the trotskyst organisations in Venezuela perceive the opposite, that the contradictions between the government and the imperialists are ever greater, that we can't discount the possibility of increasing political and military confrontations between them or that due to these upheavals that the Chávez government will find itself pressured to go beyond its programme, as happened with Fidel Castro and the July 26 movement in Cuba, which means that - according to the organisations - we should be beside the government more all the time, supporting its politics and defending it from its opponents.

Regarding this we are glad to know that like us, you think there is a distant remote that Chávez will follow the course of Fidel Castro, and that in the case of this happening, it would not be cause for celebration, as he would simply be repeating the tragic story of the Cuban revolution, which is something which obliges us to fight with all our force to prevent this situation from occurring, something which we can only achieve if we overcome the crisis of revolutionary leadership and build a revolutionary party to lead the workers and the masses towards taking power.

We hope that in a future correspondence you will tell us your appraisal with regards to the dynamic of the government and the regime, because as Marxists we think that to put forward the

correct analysis we need to concentrate more on the changes of and within a situation over time, before concentrating on a static photograph of actions and their characterization.

## REGARDING THE CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

In one part of your message you classify the government proposals as "contradictory", due to the fact that they mix progressive social reforms with measures to strengthen the bonapartist state.

This gives us the impression that you used formal logic, much like one would use in mathematics, to evaluate the reforms. We however said from the beginning that the reforms in fact liquidate many political and democratic gains made by the masses and attempt to increase the prominence of the reactionary bonapartist features of the government. In effect, we thought the reforms served to shore up capitalism, to put at risk national sovereignty and to serve the interests of the emerging bolibourgeoisie, the bureaucracy, and the corrupt.

There was no socially progressive aspect to the constitutional reforms. There were promises designed to fool the workers and the masses, but none which would have materialized immediately after the referendum. Furthermore, despite the referendum defeat, the government could have implemented and could still implement those same measures using the special powers it has been granted, yet it declines to do so, which is undeniable proof that by including them in the proposed reforms, the government's intention was to fool the masses into voting yes.

This is an important issue to clear up, because the Constitutional Reform was not made up of negative and positive aspects, of sums and parts which cancelled each other out or made the whole thing "contradictory" as you argue. Those who analysed the situation like that ended up capitulating to the government, calling for a YES vote. Fortunately you were the exception, as despite the type of analysis which you used, you ended up endorsing our electoral tactic of a blank vote. It's worth pointing out that we also campaigned amongst the workers and within communities for a No vote and for Abstention because we thought it was correct to confront and

defeat by any means necessary this anti-democratic constitutional reform.

We concluded then that with respect to the reform, we know that at the least there is a discrepancy between our characterizations, although fortunately we share the same tactic.

## REGARDING THE PSUV

Clearly the most important issue we need to discuss is that of entryism to the PSUV. This tactic was discussed in a plenary of CCURA cadre in 2007, and in a meeting of the national committee for the creation of the PRS (revolutionary socialist party), which unfortunately led to the division of our organization.

For the sake of documenting history, we would like to tell you how in the plenary of CCURA cadre of January 8 2007, after an intense debate, the following resolution, which was put forward by our current, was approved, and that it was synthesized as follows.

- CCURA will promote the self-organisation of the workers and the masses and will take place in all the new areas and political arenas which develop in this country, whether these be communal councils, workers councils, popular councils or peasants councils. In all of this our current will defend the autonomy of these organizations and their democratic character, and we will present our political and programmatic positions.
- CCURA is actively conscious of the need for workers to progress from trade union activity towards a political battle for a socialist society under a government of the workers and the masses. In order to achieve this it is imperative to create a revolutionary, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, democratic, socialist and internationalist party. With this objective in mind CCURA will take part in the construction of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), in order to promote among the rank and file this debate over its creation, its programme and its methods.
- CCURA will not dissolve itself as a current, rather it will defend its right to organise as a tendency within the PSUV in order to fight for its programme. We will fight against the parties which oppose the creation, we will fight for the PSUV to function democratically, for there to be no privileges for anyone within it, and against the

incorporation or internal or external participation of bureaucrats, capitalists or large landowners. We will make the maximum effort to collaborate with other groups which share our perspective and we will invite them to political debate in order to develop a unified programme.

- In the same way, we will defend those revolutionary organisations which do not want to join this project and we will not allow for discriminatory or defamatory campaigns to be launched against them.

Even though we had absolutely no doubt about the character of the PSUV as the party of a bourgeois government, we proposed these intermediary steps in line with the vision which our CCURA militants had of the government, in order to test the illusions which hundreds of thousands of working class, peasant and community-based activists had in the PSUV, and in order to accompany these sectors in their experiences of fighting for their interests through this organization, which they saw a political and organizational force for change.

In January 2007 it was extremely difficult to argue and to demonstrate to the masses that the PSUV was a tool of Chávez to overcome a crisis of traditional bourgeois institutions and not a party which could lead to a government of the workers, peasants and masses and create a socialist society. It was this standpoint which led us to adopt a "conditional" tactic which would allow us to act independently as an organized tendency within the PSUV and resist the entry of corrupt, bureaucratic, bourgeois or latifundista interests to the party.

Many doubted that this resolution which CCURA adopted was correct, but from our point of view it was the only policy and tactic which would allow us to accompany and be amongst the majority of CCURA comrades which were encouraged by Chávez's proposals and which had confidence that they could successfully fight within the party for the defeat of reformist and capitulatory tendencies.

These politics allowed us to confront those trotsko-chavistas which, since late 200, had accused us of isolating ourselves from the masses and called us self-proclamatory and sectarian, as the only group with the PRS project. This also made it clear that despite our understanding of the character of the PSUV, that we were prepared to accompany

them in their experiences of struggle.

Thirdly, we were sure that sooner rather later, the true character of the PSUV would be made clear. This day arrived when in late March of that year, Chávez confronted the working class and its right to self-organisation, and made it clear that from the outset the PSUV would be strictly responsive to his designs.

Since this public act of proclamation, the actions of the government towards the working class and the masses became much clearer. The violent offensives against oil workers and public employees, coupled with the task entrusted to the Ministry of Labour to liquidate our organisation, were the first causes of our activists reasonable doubts over the entryist tactic. Only the cadre of other trotskyst organizations ended up active in the PSUV, not the CCURA rank and file.

However there were other qualitative actions which helped the CCURA vanguard decide against joining the PSUV, seeing how this party has, since its birth, been tied to the most sinister elements within chavismo, representing the flowering *bolibourgeoisie*, the bureaucracy, and many of the corrupt political elite in general. Also, hundreds or perhaps even thousands of counter-revolutionary forces entered the PSUV from the old *Accion Democrática* and *COPEI* parties, such as businessmen, large landowners and all kinds of enemies to the workers and the masses. Independent organisation was impeded and in its place the "Constitutional Reform" was imposed on all aspiring militants: regarding this we have no more to add than what we have already said.

As can be seen, if the time for entryism into this party as you propose ever existed, it has passed, and in fact lasted less than even we had expected; we thought this window of opportunity may last for about a year.

In addition to all of this, what makes it even more unlikely that we will enter this party (i.e. beyond its use as a tool of a bourgeois government, its methods, its internal regime etc.) is that the organization, due to the direction it is moving in, was not able to overcome its first political challenge, which was the constitutional referendum. We consider this to be a good thing, as it shows how militants rejected the project of Chávez and the National Assembly.

## THE DEFEAT OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM AND THE BEGINNING OF A NEW PERIOD IN VENEZUELA

We agree with you that the referendum defeat has opened up a new period in Venezuela. However in no way will it create confidence on the right. Quite the opposite in fact, as their policy is one of dialogue with Chávez in order to make a common front against the masses and the revolution which they so fear. For us this has been a victory for the masses which has prevented the severing of the democratic thread which has run through the Venezuelan revolution. This is the political background which the trotsko-chavistas refuse to recognize. For them the results of December 2 represent a victory for the right or some other set of pessimistic analyses which serve only to justify their capitulation to the government.

The reality is more how you describe it, that the masses are questioning the mayors, the deputies, the governors, and the leadership of the PSUV itself. Especially after the defeat of December 2, it would go against the state of affairs and open and honest politics to call for entryism into a party which has "grown" to 6 million members, but ended up being the party of those living off government subsidies, of bureaucrats, and of the corrupt. There is no progressive dynamic there, and even less so after the December 2 referendum defeat.

In the immediate future it will be impossible to fight any government proposals from within the PSUV. The political economy of the government has turned around, with liberalization of prices of basic necessities, and the government is punishing workers and the middle class by cutting the quota of foreign currency held by the state. This new monetary policy is geared towards a weaker currency and favours inflation, and throughout this situation the PSUV is diluting itself and is not seen as an alternative by militants and revolutionaries.

This does not mean that a mass rupture has occurred with Chávez or that we are now in the era in which a revolutionary party with mass influence will be built. We want to be sensible and very careful regarding this, but what is true is that this coming year will be characterised by struggle and by defence of workers rights and by conflict with the

government, the bosses, the big landowners, and the corrupt politicians, and that this struggle will not be pass through the PSUV. That is our vision.

On the other hand we can see that a sector of the vanguard will position itself, as is already happening, to defend the independence of the trade unions and above to construct its own political tool to continue and the current revolutionary process. This is why we believe in the need for a workers party, not a party with a minimal amount of class independence, but actually a project of the working class, a mass revolutionary workers party which will identify itself with the needs of the masses and with revolutionary socialism, which has nothing to do with the projected "21st century socialism" promoted by Chávez. Due to all these considerations we do not agree with your assessment that this is the time for revolutionaries to adopt an entryist tactic regarding the PSUV.

Although we do not agree with your tactic, we want to note that your tactic of entryism in the PSUV is different to that of the trotsko-chavistas who did enter into that party, as for them the direction of the party is "in dispute", and for them it's direction, its programme and policies cannot be seen as counter-revolutionary, and therefore they do not want to destroy the party from within, which is the most fundamental aspect of the entryist tactic, in order to join with other progressive currents and leave alongside them in order to create real revolutionary party.

Vemos en sus posiciones una política genuina revolucionaria y no capituladora en su formulación del entrismo, distinta a las posiciones neo-reformistas y trotsko-chavistas. Sólo que la vemos equivocada o desfasada en el tiempo, ya que ha transcurrido un tiempo prudencial en el que los trabajadores y los activistas han hecho una extraordinaria experiencia y le han propinado una derrota monumental al proyecto bonapartista reaccionario, burocrático y corrupto de la reforma constitucional impulsada por el gobierno.

We think your positions shows real revolutionary politics and not the capitulation disguised as entryism which is practiced by the neo-reformists and the trotsko-chavistas. It is just that we think your tactic is mistaken and stuck in the past, as a reasonable amount of time has passed now in which workers and activists have created an extraordinary

experience and have caused a monumental defeat for the bonapartist, reactionary, bureaucratic and corrupt constitutional reforms proposed by the government.

## PROPOSAL

Like we said at the beginning of this letter, we see in your positions some fundamental similarities with ours, which we cannot help but notice and which encourage us to have dialogue and open and comradely debate with you, which will also give us the chance to test whether it is possible to advance onwards to common actions at the national and international level and, why not, even towards the creation of a joint international organization.

We leave these proposals in your hands and we eagerly await your comments.

We send you revolutionary and comradely greetings and we hope that your activities will be successful.

**Orlando Chirino, Armando Guerra,  
Emilio Bastidas y Miguel A. Hernández**  
For the Committee for the creation of  
the Party of the Socialist Revolution

## ENDNOTES

1 [www.uit-ci.org](http://www.uit-ci.org)

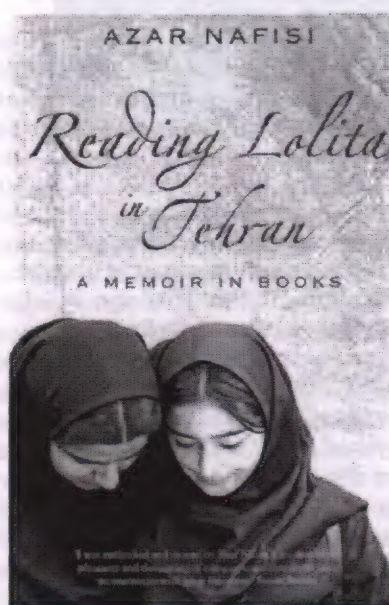
# Illusions in America will not help Iranian women

Natalie Sedley reviews *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi

**R**eading *Lolita in Tehran* is an autobiographical work which recounts Azar Nafisi's struggle as a professor of English literature in the Islamic Republic. Educated in America and determined to defend academic freedom in the face of a repressive regime, she eventually resigns her teaching post in 1995. She then decides to invite a group of women, passionate about literature ("her girls") to her house for weekly discussions of banned books.

Literature is invariably a target for dictatorial regimes, as it was Hitler's Germany or the Soviet Union. Oppositional views, banned from public debate in the media, find expression there. Even classical works can take on an oppositional meaning by embodying alternative values to those officially allowed. This is true in Iran where, as Nafisi describes, "Fires were set to publishing houses and bookstores for disseminating immoral works of fiction. One woman novelist was jailed for her writings and charged with spreading prostitution." Through discussing English language works such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*, *Pride and Prejudice* and, of course, *Lolita*, Nafisi and her girls hoped "to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to."

These books are seen as "giving a different colour to Tehran" and the work makes astute points about the regime's hypocrisy in banning them. *Lolita* is taboo because it describes a sexual relationship between a middle-aged man and a young teenager – yet the Islamic Republic allows girls as young as nine to be married off, often to much older men. The chapter on *Jane Austen* begins with the ironic statement from one of Nafisi's girls, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year old virgin wife." The girls sadly



remark that "The Islamic Republic has taken us back to Jane Austen's times" – whilst many of their mothers chose who to marry, today their daughters have little choice in the matter.

Nafisi rightly detests the strict dress codes imposed on women and recognises the importance of the right to wear or not to wear the veil. She tries to subvert the code – she never really learns to tie a hijab correctly and always leaves a few strands of hair loose to show her defiance. When her girls attend the class for the first time, she describes how she "could not get over the shock of seeing them shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into colour. When my students came into that room, they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self".

In its broader descriptions of life in the Islamic Republic, the novel gives an abundance of examples of the terrible oppression imposed by the regime, particularly by the "Blood of God" militias that "patrol the streets to make sure that women...wear their veils properly, do not

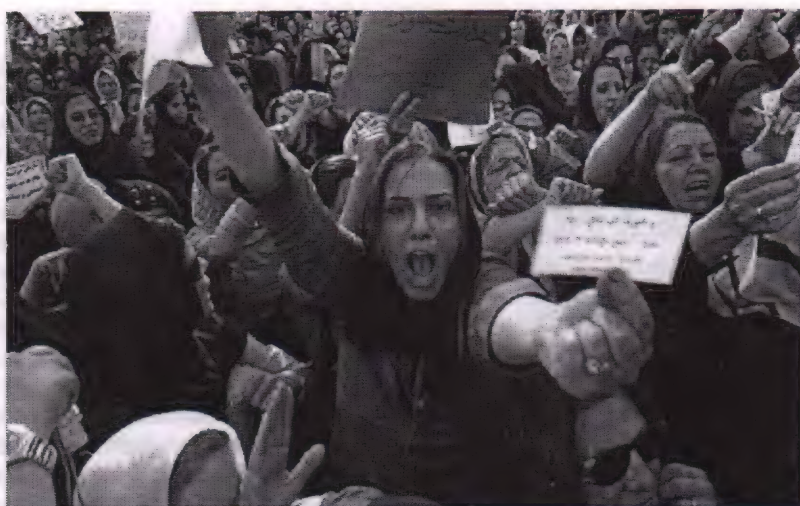
wear makeup, do not walk in public with men who are not their fathers, brothers or husbands."

Anecdotes range from the absurd (a group of women reprimanded for eating apples "too seductively" in a University yard) to the draconian (a class of primary school girls suddenly dragged out of a lesson for body searches and inspections, resulting in one girl's slightly-too-long nails being cut by the headmistress "so close that she had drawn blood").

Perhaps the most shocking incident is when a search warrant is issued on a group of girls, "properly dressed, with their scarves and long robes". When it yields no alcohol or forbidden tapes and CDs, the girls are nevertheless taken to a special jail and kept overnight, forced to submit to two virginity tests observed by students, and eventually "made to sign a document confessing to sins they had not committed and subjected to twenty-five lashes."

Of course, as a work of fiction it is feasible that some stories could be exaggerated, but there is no doubt that it gives a poignant picture of the awful realities of life as a woman in the Islamic Republic. Another strength of the book is its powerful account of the Iran-Iraq war. The terror of attacks by bombs and chemical weapons, the destruction and desertion of lives as young men lined up to become martyrs for Islam. It also vividly describes the aftermath, including the horrifying mass execution of political prisoners.

What is really missing from the book is any discussion of ways that this repressive regime could be changed. Nafisi describes the classes as helping her and her girls rediscover themselves as "living, breathing human beings" and "to escape and to create our own pockets of freedom." Instead of actively resisting the regime, they create a private space where they can hide from it and temporarily escape their real lives. That millions of



Iranian women demonstrate in Tehran

women and young men are obliged to do this is itself a condemnation of the hide-bound but brutal theocracy which established itself on the wreckage of the Iranian Revolution of 1979

Nafisi thinks that herself and her students "had not become part of the crowd who watched the executions, but they did not have the power to protest them, either". Therefore the only way to avoid being complicit in the regime's crimes was "to find a way to preserve ones individuality, that unique quality which evades description but differentiates one human being from the other." She is alienated not only from the Islamism of the mullahs, but also from political opposition to it.

It is no wonder then that she expresses her admiration for "the nineteen year old Nabokov who, during the Russian Revolution, would not allow himself to be diverted by the sound of bullets. He kept on writing his solitary poems while he heard the guns and saw the bloody fights from his window." In the second chapter when she goes back in time to her period of study in America, she admits that she joined the Iranian student movement reluctantly – attracted by the romantic atmosphere, but repelled by the Confederation's direction over its members' lifestyles and by "the long and confrontational meetings between rival factions."

She wishes she could be left alone to study, discuss and teach great works of literature; she wants literary works to be appreciated for what they are and not simply as "handmaidens to ideology." Besides the fact that her own literary work is clearly written for ideological reasons as well, just for a different liberal one

Nafisi falls into real intellectual snobbery on several occasions. She describes many young men "from the provinces or from traditional families" as "the usurpers, who had been admitted to the university and given power not because of their own merit and hard work but because of their ideological affiliations" – that is, they are lower class people who should not be mixing with the intellectuals in their university.

However, the most serious problem is that Nafisi's condemnation of the Islamic Republic blinds her to the defects of US society and the crimes of US imperialism. It was the US (and Britain) that overthrew the democratically elected regime of nationalist Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953, instituting a twenty-five year dictatorship under the Shah. With the blessing and logistical support of the Americans the brutal secret police SAVAK terrorised intellectuals and political oppositionist, in a manner as bad or even worse than today.

The virtual siege that Iran has been subjected to ever since, the present threats to attack it are not the ministrations of a friendly democratic power longing to liberate its intellectuals. Rather they are the actions of an imperialist bully seeking to loot the country's oil reserves and give a lesson to all countries to knuckle under to the slightest whim of the USA. The mass of the Iranian people will, quite rightly stand up to this bullying and if the liberal intelligentsia make the fatal mistake of trying to encourage the US to intervene they will be isolated from and despised by the masses as traitors and stooges of the US.

Columbia Professor Hamid Dabashi has argued that the book sees "perfectly

legitimate critiques [of women's oppression in Iran and under Islamic law] mutate into entirely illegitimate formulations at the service of facilitating the US global domination." Throughout this book Nafisi refuses to take imperialism seriously as a threat. She criticises her friend Mahtab's Marxist organisation (whose name is not mentioned) for wanting to deal with the imperialists and their lackeys before women's rights. Of course fighting for women's rights is not counterposed to fighting imperialism: should re-enforce one another. However, she goes on to ask: "What imperialists, which lackeys"? – i.e. military action against Iran. She describes the day in 1979 that the US embassy was occupied by what she calls a "ragtag" group of students, when "A tent was raised on the sidewalk and filled with propaganda against America, exposing its crimes around the world" without showing the slightest recognition of what these crimes were.

In truth, this occupation was a diversion by the Ayatollah Khomeini, aimed at consolidating his Islamic counterrevolution over what had started as a progressive, working class revolution against the pro-imperialist Shah. While Nafisi states that she and others participated in the revolution because they were demanding more rights, not fewer, such bourgeois "a-political" intellectuals will never understand what can and what did go wrong with a revolution. They can only see it as a catastrophe and blame the uneducated and uncultured masses. It is for this reason that her book offers no help for understanding the condition of working class people in Iran today, and their struggle against both their reactionary regime and US imperialism.

To bourgeois intellectuals like Nafisi, all revolutions are the same. She writes – "The revolution Gold desired was a Marxist one and ours was Islamic, but they had a great deal in common, in that they were both ideological and totalitarian." So finally and not surprisingly given this attitude, Nafisi is actively involved in pressing the US to assist with bringing about "regime change in Iran." Indeed books like hers – appearing in huge numbers in popular editions – play a subtle but real role in spreading the idea that a war against Iran will be a war for women's liberation. You would think that some one who has seen what has happened in Iran's neighbours, Afghanistan and Iraq, might hesitate before appealing for such "salvation" for her own country.

# Marxist theory of the law

Natalie Sedley reviews *Between Equal Rights – a Marxist Theory of International Law*, China Miéville

**B**etween Equal Rights is an adaptation of China Miéville's PhD thesis, in which he offers both a comprehensive history of the development of international law and a devastating critique of the liberal idea that it can be used against imperialism for progressive ends. In doing so he also addresses the question of the legal form at a theoretical level, attempting to address the difficult and recurring question: "What is the nature of a law between bodies without a superordinate authority?"

In the context of an antiwar movement that often used the "illegality" of the US / UK invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a key criticism of the ensuing war and occupation, one can understand why Miéville has entitled his first chapter "International law has become important." He starts by pointing out that international law is often lacking in theory and tends to be defined by its supposed regulatory effect, rather than systematically looking at the legal form which, for Miéville, must be the fundamental unit of analysis. This review will focus primarily on Miéville's analysis of the legal form, his criticism of international law, and his argument that law, including international law, is inseparable from violence.

## THE LEGAL FORM

Miéville rejects both positivism (the idea that the practice of states constitutes the primary source of international law) and naturalism, which sees basic principles of law as derived from universally valid principles of justice. He rightly argues that neither is persuasive from a materialist point of view. He approves of McDougal's view of "law as inextricably part of politics" and his view that interpretation not just something done to understand law but "part of the process that is law," but points out that this still does not explain the existence of law as a distinct part of political process.

Miéville devotes chapters three and four to an examination of the legal form, with chapter three providing a detailed exposition on the theory of Pashukanis, who was the most famous Soviet Marxist legal philosopher in the 1920s and 1930s as well as the only one to be

significantly recognised outside the USSR. While Pashukanis saw himself as building on a theory that already existed in Marx and Engels, Miéville sees this as overly modest; it may be more accurate to say that Pashukanis used the theoretical tools of Marxism to tackle an entirely new subject. Pashukanis' book *The General Theory of Law and Marxism* published in 1924 can be seen as "the starting point for Marxist jurisprudence" with its "attempt to approximate the legal form to the commodity form". Commodity exchange occurs "when man becomes seen as a legal personality - the bearer of rights (as opposed to customary privileges)." It is therefore an exchange where two property-owning agents are equal and opposed, so that "contestation is at least implied" and "a specific form of social regulation is necessary" in order to mediate this - namely law.

Miéville argues that this theory of law is preferable to other Marxist views, e.g. of law as "an ideological fiction, imposed on a social reality to which it has no correspondence by some organ of centralized authority." In his view, although there obviously is an ideological function to law, including international law, this does not explain "why this 'idea' of international law should have arisen at a certain time and political-economic context." Similarly, 'sociological' theories of law, which "treat[ed] law...as the manifestation of state coercion" are rejected because they direct their attention exclusively towards "the class interests served or the economic functions performed by one or other measure of law or punishment", instead of "why these interests should have been served by the legal form of regulation." In other words, Pashukanis, like Miéville, insists that the key question is why the legal form has been chosen rather than its effects. This may be true, but it is never fully explained why Marxists should not be just as interested, if not more so, in understanding and explaining the repressive, pro-capitalist effects of the law; arguably *Beyond Equal Rights* could benefit from some more detail on the latter.

This is not to deny the theoretical impor-

tance of Pashukanis' work on the legal form; its basis in Marx's own writings is shown when he quotes from *Capital Volume One* "In order that these objects may enter into relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another as persons whose will resides in those objects, and must behave in such a way that each does not appropriate the commodity of the other, and alienate his own, except through an act to which both parties consent." This convincingly shows the basis of law in the need to regulate relations between individuals exchanging commodities.

While Pashukanis's writing is an essential basis for Miéville's theory, it did not in itself focus mainly on international law. However, he did write an entry on 'International Law' for the *Encyclopaedia of State and Law* published between 1925 and 1927 by the Communist Academy, which is reproduced as an appendix in *Between Equal Rights*. Here he developed his commodity-form theory of law, writing for example that "Every struggle, including the struggle between imperialist states, must include an exchange...Every exchange is the continuation of one armed conflict and the prelude to the next." He also briefly described how "The spread and development of international law occurred on the basis of the spread and development of the capitalist mode of production."

Miéville spends chapter 4 developing the application of Pashukanis' theory to politics, and then to international law. He argues that the social relations of capitalism can be revealed through law in many different ways, and makes the important point that "Manifestation may not be one-sidedly in the interests of capital: class struggle is intrinsic to capitalism, and the attempt to 'domesticate' resistance means that 'progressive' laws may be passed at times of working class strength." He cites Marx's discussion of laws limiting the working day - it was in this context that Marx pointed out both the space for contestation, and the unequal bargaining power of the capitalist and the worker in this situation, stating "Between equal rights, force decides."

Miéville then discusses "state-derivation" theory, whereby the class character of state power is concealed and coercion appears as "emanating from an abstract collective person, exercised...in the interest of all parties to legal transactions." However, it is here that his views begin to diverge from those of Pashukanis who argues that "coercion...contradicts the fundamental precondition for dealings between the owners of commodities," which is in sharp contrast to Miéville's (correct) view that "disputation and contestation is intrinsic to the commodity, in the fact that its private ownership implies the exclusion of others." This leads him to the important point that "This system of social production relations generates a permanent and general requirement for means of 'defence'... Without a constant threat and / or application of force, commodity production would stand in danger of rapid subversion and breakdown."

However, what is crucial for Miéville about Pashukanis's theory is that the state is seen as contingent to the legal form, so that the lack of an international sovereign does not mean there is no international law. He argues that "The entire feudal legal system rested on...contractual relations, guaranteed by no 'third force'. In just the same way, modern international law recognises no coercion organised from without." It therefore becomes possible to understand why legal systems without a sovereign are regulated by 'self-help' remedies - that is, violence and coercion. This is undoubtedly a brilliant insight, compared to which, as Miéville notes, "The signal failure of much mainstream international law to make sense of sanctions and violence is marked." It applies to international law since "despite the importance of the UN in international law, it is in no real way a superordinate authority...The only bodies able to provide the necessary coercion for international law are the subjects of that law themselves, the states."

## THE HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

The first half of *Between Equal Rights* is extremely abstract and theoretical, but in chapter 5 Miéville turns to consider the history of international law. He stresses the distinct nature of modern international law, which, in his view, cannot exist without sovereign states, and distinguishes it carefully from "written agreements between rulers of pre-feudal antiquity." While certain institutions of international law "can be traced across the historical rupture to modernity," it is only "with the triumph of capitalism and its commodification of all social relations that the legal form universalised and became modern international

law." Taking the example of treaties, early agreements can be distinguished from those under modern international law because the subjects are not sovereign nation states.

Miéville goes on to discuss where international law originated, criticising theories that regions such as Asia and Africa had 'international law' which are "sometimes adduced without argument, simply by reference to the existence of interacting polities." He does not see international law as one Western system, or one Western and one Eastern system, but as "the dialectical result of the very process of conflictual, expanding inter-polity interaction in an age of early state forms and mercantile colonialism." Rather than international law spreading as a result of colonialism, international law is colonialism.

A key example given to back up this bold claim is the discovery of the Americas and the ensuing period of mercantile colonialism, which "gave rise to a vast number of disputes which the scanty International Code of the Middle Ages was quite unable to settle." Hence the Treaty of Torsedillas, on 2 July 1494, where Spain and Portugal drew a line 370 miles west of the Cape Verde Islands to divide the Americas between them, the West becoming Spanish and the East Portuguese. The mediaeval schema, based on the Pope and the Christian community, was also problematised by the discovery of native Americans, whose legal status did not fit into this and was therefore uncertain. The early writer Vitoria emphasised that, although barbarians, they were human like the Europeans. This shows the beginnings of a theory of sovereignty, although unlike European Christians the native Americans were not seen as having the right to wage a 'just war.' Central to the theory of sovereignty which developed was the formal equality of parties engaging in trade, despite their inherent inequality given the huge material discrepancies.

Miéville then discusses the changes that took place in the concept of "sovereignty" in the seventeenth century: while it was not initially seen as intrinsically linked to equality, there was a move towards a legal order centred on "juridical agents conceived as equal owners of alienable property." The fact that this increasing emphasis on equality disguises unequal forces of coercion means that law, and international law in particular, not only is a system predicated on violence but is its own ideological obfuscation of that fact."

The final part of the chapter analyses the changes occurring in seventeenth century maritime law to argue that the political forms of this period were transitional to capitalism. He discusses various legal strategies that were

deployed as part of the mercantilist state-building process, including the East India monopoly companies on which the trade with India was founded. Unlike the colonial plunder of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries "in the new global order such lines [dividing territories] could not be drawn, but nor were the colonial powers politically powerful enough to ensure hegemony through the hidden coercion in the legal form" as they "possessed a degree of sovereignty... the East India Companies were the perfect agents to police this 'transitional colonialism'". This is in contrast to theorists like Teschke, who argues against the idea of a transitional period and believes that the public/private form of the East India Companies means they could not be leading towards modern capitalism. Miéville points out that this is based on an erroneous view that capitalism separates the economic and the political, when in actual fact, "actually-existing capitalism is replete with examples of the political intruding into the economic, such as the post-war welfare state and nationalised industries, and...massive - systematic - arms spending."

Miéville also notes that the fundamental reason Teschke wishes to separate mercantilism and capitalism is the centrality of war to mercantilism. To this he contrasts the "tradition of Marxist writing in which the political coercion in the economic form is precisely expressed in war," citing both Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* and Bukharin's *Imperialism and World Economy*. Miéville calls the latter work "brilliant" although he recognises that Bukharin's view of twentieth-century monopolisation of ever larger firms buying each other up and tending towards state-capitalist trusts is "perhaps too schematic." Miéville adopts this position because of the SWP's long term attraction to Bukharin's theory, as opposed to Lenin's, in explaining imperialism as if fitted their world view of Russia being state capitalist before 1991. In fact, it is symptomatic of Bukharin's propensity to extrapolate tendencies of world development which led Lenin, despite his admiration for Bukharin's work, to state that he "never understood the dialectic." However, the more important point here is Bukharin's view of "military competition in monopoly capitalism as an expression of the same competitive dynamic associated with capitalist economies," which, "gives the lie to Teschke's claims that the war-based exchange of mercantilism is antipathetic to capitalism." This helps to understand the prevalence of violence in international law, as a substitute for the kind of overarching authority that exists domestically.

## IMPERIALISM

Miéville looks in more depth at theories of imperialism in chapter 6, in which he continues to argue that imperialism and international law mutually constitute each other - although they cannot be reduced to one another. He criticises Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, for categorising certain "basic features" as fundamental to imperialism, giving the example of the export of capital and stating that "some imperialist powers, like the US and Japan, in fact imported capital up to 1914." This is actually an erroneous criticism since capitalism was not yet fully developed in the US and Japan at this time. Indeed, US capitalism was exporting capital by 1914 - for instance the first US owned factory in Europe was the Singer factory in Scotland, built in the 1890's. However, he accepts other fundamental aspects of Lenin's theory, such as the focus on monopoly capitalism and the crucial point that "imperialism is not simply a policy of the stronger powers" but rather stemmed from "a dynamic in capitalism itself."

He then looks at the end of the mercantilist monopolism as a dominant system from 1776, to be replaced by free-trade, and argues that at this time European states generally "did not want to take on the burdens of formal colonial rule." At this point, international law denied any legal existence to the colonies, but crises of colonial power meant that it was increasingly forced to recognise them as legal entities. However, Miéville argues that the very politics of recognition was bound up with imperialism; as a result, "formal sovereign independence not only does not preclude domination, but can, through recognition, be the very institution by which domination is exercised." He argues that there is no single agenda on the basis of which recognition will or will not be granted; rather, this relates to inter-imperialist rivalry. It could be interesting to develop this point and look more specifically at the material factors influencing whether or not a country is recognised - for USA refused to recognise the People's Republic of China until, in 1917, Beijing agreed to side with Washington against Moscow.

Moving on to a discussion of the nineteenth century, Miéville quotes the point that "It was principally by using force or threatening to use force that European states compelled non-European states to enter into 'treaties' that basically entitled the European powers to whatever they pleased." This is a very compelling argument and a reader already coming from a Marxist or anti-imperialist standpoint would have little trouble believing it. However, it would be much more generally convincing if

he gave an example of a treaty, what it said and how the non-European state was forced to enter it. He does say that the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, concluded at the end of Britain's first Opium War with China, is a classic example, but explains only that "Britain threatened to bombard Nanking, and forced the Chinese to accept utterly punitive and degrading terms." However, he does not explain what the terms were or how they put the Chinese at a disadvantage. In fact, the Treaty ceded Hong Kong to Britain and allowed the establishment of five "treaty ports" at which the British could trade freely. This not only legalised the profitable opium trade but opened China to competition from cheap British goods, especially textiles. Into the bargain, China had to pay 21 million silver dollars in "reparations" to the British. It is fair to say that this treaty fully illustrates Miéville's point about the role of violence in imposing unfair terms on poorer nations.

After discussing the "scramble for Africa" in which the bulk of the continent was divided between imperialist powers, Miéville goes on to look at the decolonisation. He argues that while this "was often hard won by the mass action of those at the sharp end of imperialism," "the juridical form of independent sovereignty was one which imperialism itself tended to universalise." This raises the interesting question of whether or not, without the struggles in the colonies, independence would still have been gained at significantly the same time as it was. In any case, as this process was completed "the commodity-form of law began to formalise relations as the market economy encroached on pre-existing modes of production, distribution and exchange." Miéville convincingly shows how imperialist relations were intrinsic to the formal equality of sovereignty and thus to international law.

## CRITICISM OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

In his early discussion of theory in international law, Miéville points out the importance of distinguishing between firstly, those who deny that international law is law at all and secondly, those who allege that international law is not an ultimately determining force in international affairs and state's policies; and, thirdly, those who are merely sceptical of the view that international law can be used to systematically improve the world. Miéville rejects the first two theories as formalist, as they are derived from the traditional approach of looking at behaviour and then comparing it to "rules" of law. He is in favour of the third - the view that "international law is law, is effective, but cannot maintain justice or order."

Such criticism is rare for international lawyers, not only because of resistance to "biting the hand that feeds", but also because of the liberal view of world politics as having an acceptable structure, which is just interrupted by the pathological condition of violence. Writers from the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) school have criticised these liberal views, pointing out their internal contradictions and inability to resolve the tension between demands for individual freedom and social order. Of the handful of CLS scholars writing on international law, Miéville discusses the work of Martti Koskenniemi in most detail. Koskenniemi builds on Marx's understanding in *Capital* that the social relations of general commodity production are foundations for liberalism & its contradictions, and argues that relations between states under capitalism are founded on the same principle. Just as within the nation state, individuals interact as property owners, so on an international level states interact as property owners, because each state is seen to "own" its sovereign territory."

Miéville also spends some time examining those few Marxists that have written specifically on international law. He quickly rejects the "official" theories of the former Soviet bloc, which centred on "the extent to which a new and separate sphere of 'socialist international law' was operational, thus offering only "a slightly modified variant of mainstream, bourgeois international legal theory." He is more sympathetic to the work of B.S. Chimni, who points out the difficulties of international law relying on interpretation and argues that a system based on rules would be more progressive. However, Miéville criticises Chimni for seeing the class nature of international law as deriving from "the content of particular legal rulings, as laid out and enforced by 'ruling classes'...rather than anything in the structure of international law." To Miéville, this means that Chimni, like other theorists, fails to provide a systematic theory of the legal form, because he "denies without any theoretical investigation the possibility that the very legal form itself - of which these 'rules' are simply expressions - is constrained and embedded with inequalities ultimately derived from class inequality."

Miéville also takes issue with Chimni's views that mutually constituting legal concepts such as "domestic jurisdiction and international concern, aggressive war and self-defence" are not really indeterminate. By contrast, Miéville agrees with writers like Koskenniemi, who see disagreements over the meaning of such concepts as inherent and essential to international law. Miéville's example of the Vietnam war shows the importance of this point: the legality or otherwise of the conflict depended large-

ly on the reading of Articles of the UN Charter, namely Article 2(4) (refraining in international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state) and Article 51 (such provisions do not affect the inherent right of self-defence against an armed attack). The same point can be made about many conflicts which, to any anti-imperialist or even pacifist observer, are clearly acts of aggression, but are justified as defensive actions by the aggressor - Israeli operations against neighbouring countries such as Palestine and Lebanon being a good example.

Much later in the book, Miéville takes up the example of Israel to show the serious limitations of international law as a vehicle for progressive change. As his book went to press in 2005, the International Court of Justice ruled that the huge concrete and barbed wire fence Israel was constructing around and into the occupied territories was illegal and "tantamount to de facto annexation." Today, what has come to be known as the Apartheid Wall in the West Bank continues to be built, stealing land and water resources from Palestine and cutting Palestinians off from their jobs and families. This is hardly surprising since, as Miéville explains, Israel immediately made it clear that it would ignore the ruling, making it "nothing more than ink on paper," completely impotent to protect the land and lives of the Palestinian people.

Miéville makes the same point in the context international law and the war on Iraq. He begins his final chapter, "Against the Rule of Law," with reference to a letter by 16 scholars of international law published in the *Guardian* in March 2003, just weeks before the US and UK invasion, which argued that "there is no justification under international law for the use of military force against Iraq." As he points out, the first and most obvious problem with this letter is its failure to achieve its ends: "These writers cannot back up their interpretations with force. The Iraq war went ahead, with the British and American governments insisting it was legal."

Fundamentally, the question of whether or not a war is legal is, firstly, beside the point - even if the invasion and occupation of Iraq was legal, all progressive people must clearly still be opposed to it as a conflict that has devastated a country and killed over a million civilians so that oil companies and other multinationals could profit - and, secondly, can never be conclusively answered anyway, since "for every claim there is a counter-claim." Miéville looks at these claims and counterclaims in detail for the first Gulf War and criticises Chomsky's insistence that this was obviously illegal, argu-

ing that, "The Gulf War can plausibly be defended as either legal or illegal." Saddam Hussein's justifications included the views "that Kuwait was de jure part of Iraq, that he had been invited in, and that Kuwait had harmed his interests." While these arguments may be unconvincing and unpopular, Miéville's point is that this does not change their status as legal arguments. It is impossible to say conclusively whether or not they are correct because, unlike the national arena, where claims and counterclaims are ultimately resolved by a judge, there is no such arbitrator on an international level. The only reason that legal arguments do not go on forever is that "their resolution is not a result of the internal logic of the concepts, but represents interpretation backed by force." Hence Marx's observation, on which the book's title is based - "Between equal rights, force decides."

## INTERNATIONAL LAW AND VIOLENCE

This explanation of the decisive nature of force in international law substantiates Miéville's assertion early in the book that "International law is not counterposed to force and imperialism: it is an expression of it." This argument draws strongly on Pashukanis who argued that a group "capable of defending their conditions of existence in armed struggle" was the "morphological precursor of the legal subject." The implicit, constitutive nature of violence within international law is demonstrated by the example of Russian Reinsurance case, in which Justice Lehman said that a state would be recognised on "the fall of one government establishment and the substitution of another governmental establishment which actually governs, which is able to enforce its claims by military force."

If claims are enforced by military force, then clearly stronger states with greater military might will be better able to "back up" their interpretations of international law. Moreover, the debate at an international level is at the more abstract level of deciding not only whether an action fits a particular category - e.g. whether an action is a reprisal - but also whether that category of action is itself illegal. Miéville then goes on to say that the more powerful state is the more powerful capitalist state, and that "the strategic logic of capitalist states...is ultimately derived from the exploitative logic of capitalism." While he is absolutely right to say this, he does not fully explain what he means by it. An example to illustrate his point would be useful; this could be as simple as the widely-accepted understanding of the War on Terror as stemming from a need to control resources, particularly oil, in the

Middle East.

A discussion of the War on Terror would also add to Miéville's explanation of the use of human rights rhetoric to justify violent intervention, but cites another important example which shortly preceded it - the NATO war against Serbia over Kosovo in 1999. Although humanitarian justifications for conflict are not new, Miéville argues that their recent articulation has, to an extent, "restructured international legal relations" and dovetailed with "a move towards international criminalisation." While theorists such as Hardt and Negri have cited the development of a new juridical structure over and above states, Miéville argues against the notion of a fundamental change; against the claim that "sovereignty is now 'no longer' inviolable" he points out that "in fact, of course, sovereignty has always been overridden by intervention."

## CONCLUSION

Beyond Equal Rights is a very impressive work in which Miéville has pulled together the threads of Marxist theory and international legal scholarship to produce a convincing theory of international law. The only significant criticism is that parts of the book are arguably too abstract, omitting examples or failing to develop these to conclusively prove a point. However, the theoretical points that Miéville has developed - chiefly, the commodity form theory of law and the inextricable nature of international law, imperialism and violence - are undoubtedly correct, and his in depth discussions are a hugely valuable contribution to the under-developed Marxist school of international law.

In the light of these arguments, as well as the failure of international law to prevent the brutal events of the War on Terror, Miéville is surely right in his contention that "To fundamentally change the dynamics of the system it would be necessary not to reform the institutions but to eradicate the forms of law - which means the fundamental reformulation of the political-economic system of which they are expressions. The project to achieve this is the best hope for global emancipation, and it would mean the end of law."<sup>64</sup>

It is worth adding, as Miéville does not, that this project can only be achieved in one way - through a global revolution.

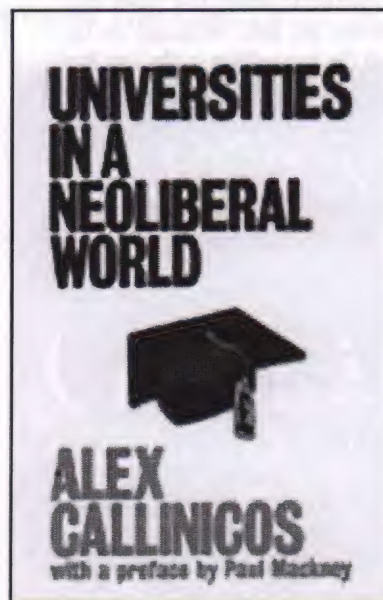
# Neoliberalism in the universities

Rachel Archer reviews *Universities in a Neoliberal World*, Alex Callinicos

In 2006 UCU members went on a three month assessment boycott. Despite official support from the National Union of Students (NUS) it suffered from a lack of support amongst ordinary students. The media reported that students were "being subjected to 'disruption and uncertainty' as lecturers continue their action for better pay."<sup>1</sup> Reasons behind the UCU action did not tend to go past the demand for a pay increase and the focus was generally on unmarked dissertations. Indeed, students as 'customers' were being short-changed. What the assessment boycott actually represented was a resistance to steady attacks on the structure of higher education institutions in Britain, since Thatcherite policy in the 1980's.

These attacks and the need for resistance the subject of Alex Callinicos' pamphlet 'Universities in a Neoliberal World'. It examines how big business and capitalist governments have created a 'knowledge economy' and managed to capture universities to make them profitable. It addresses the changing role of universities and their relationship to the class-divide in a neoliberal economy.

What Callinicos rightly does is place the changing role of universities in a world market context. Addressing the fact that Britain is a capitalist, globalised economy, which means privatisation of public services and therefore exposure to market fluctuations, he provides a thorough Marxist critique of the situation and links the struggle against neo liberal attacks on universities to the struggle against neoliberal attacks everywhere; "According to neoliberalism, private enterprise is best. This is the rationale for the large-scale privatisation of the provision of health services being forced through by New Labour."<sup>2</sup> His real success in this pamphlet then, is that he recognises the proletarianisation of university lecturers and academics- "Proletarianisation is the process of



being reduced to a wage labourer, dependent on her ability to sell her labour power on the market and subject to managerial power at work. Precarity is the condition of insecurity experienced by increasing numbers of workers and would-be workers in the neoliberal era- of being permanently on the edge of unemployment."<sup>3</sup>

Callinicos backs up his argument well, being himself a professor at one of the Russell Group universities competing for the big money handouts for research. One of the real strengths in the pamphlet is the light shed on the Research Assessment Exercise initiatives. The RAE, by its own description "is to enable the higher education funding bodies to distribute public funds for research selectively on the basis of quality. Institutions conducting the best research receive a larger proportion of the available grant so that the infrastructure for the top level of research in the UK is protected and developed."<sup>4</sup> This would logically fit with the government's plans to subject the university system in England to a kind of Americanisation. After all, the

better the university the more it costs the student, so why not the better the university the more money it receives? RAE works on a numerical star rating system. The higher the number the more money per academic. This is all very well except what Callinicos also points out is that universities have been split into research institutions and teaching institutions and if you happen to be the latter then you will not be receiving the 5\* rating which means no £30,000 plus hand-outs. The unsurprising news being that the 'research' institutions tend to be Oxbridge, Manchester, Leeds, UCL, Kings and Imperial (for example) which means the ex-polytechnics like Hertfordshire or Middlesex are missing out. It is at this point, that Callinicos addresses the real issue- "that a hierarchy of institutions helps to reproduce the class inequalities that are already pervasive in the schooling system."<sup>5</sup> Privately educated students go to Oxford and their comprehensive counterparts go to Oxford Brookes; thus the class divide is cemented and institutionalised thanks to some research funding system.

The problem with Callinicos' pamphlet is that he takes a typically superficial SWP look at capitalism and resistance. Although he offers a developed understanding of governmental attacks on institutions and academics he lacks a real analysis of the effects this will have on the consumers of university education: students. There have been some serious hits made to students since the Thatcher years. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly in the context of this pamphlet, is that NUS was stripped of its power to fund political actions, under the banner of 'ultra-vires' and every neoliberal government since (be it Conservative or New Labour) has slashed its power more and more. NUS is effectively a charity that may or may not speak out for students. In regards to the increase in tuition fees and no cap (there

is a year on increase in tuition fees, around £70) NUS was unable to do anything apart from show demonstrations. Callinicos, as an SWP member, celebrates the mass demonstrations. In his conclusion he draws comparisons to large scale mass movements such as the fight against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999, the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the anti-G8 protests in Genoa in 2001, as well as the recent riots and protests against the CPE laws in France. What he misses out in these comparisons is that it was not purely numbers on the street that made them impressive but the potential to organise really radical struggle against the government. If, as he rightly points out, there is a process of proletarianisation taking place amongst academics and students (who will eventually become part of the work force) then a rank and file student movement to organise action is crucial. There is also a need for a student union that takes militant action alongside trade unions. Although the NUS supported the UCU back in 2006 its lack of any active support meant that the students it 'represents' were uninformed about the strike and it was felt that they suffered because of it. In the preface Paul Mackney makes the unashamedly optimistic statement that "the first generation of students to suffer from top-up fees are the very school students who walked out over the war on Iraq, who have engaged with social movements [...] I remain convinced that just as they have won the argument for withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, they will find new ways of organising resistance."<sup>6</sup> A typical pat-on-the-back for the Stop The War Coalition, who maintain that the constant demonstrations in Britain was the primary reason for any troop withdrawals. Unfortunately the leadership of students around the campaigns against top up fees and the introduction of loans instead of grants was weak and indecisive - the NUS was crippled by a lack of militancy caused by bureaucratisation and being infested with careerists who have their eyes on jobs as MP's after university. A series of moderately successful demonstrations against the neo liberal policies gradually diminished until they ceased all together. Now the NUS is fighting for its life as a democratic organisation as the right wing try and force through the governance review to finally politically neuter the NUS.

By focusing so much on the effects of government policies on institutions and the effects that this will have, he also misses out on inequalities felt by ethnic minorities (who still make up a tiny proportion of the student population) women and students from less privileged backgrounds. The Guardian recently reported that female graduates take, on average, 5 years longer to pay back their student loans, compared to male graduates, thanks to a never ending gender pay gap.<sup>7</sup> Although he has exposed the inequalities in the way that the institutions are funded, he has not gone further to explain the effects this may have on the students who attend these universities.

Callinicos' argument is very true- the only alternative to neoliberalism is resistance. The only alternative to neoliberalism in universities is for those exploited, both students and workers, to organise effective resistance and solidarity against neoliberalism.

'Universities in a Neoliberal World' is very well researched and, at times, makes some very complicated capitalist jargon very clear. However, there are occasions that leave the reader none the wiser, for example in the chapter 'Neoliberalism and the "knowledge economy"' you are left feeling less clear about the knowledge industry than you were to begin with. That is to say that there are some points which Callinicos over complicates.

An important pamphlet, which generally demystifies acronyms and exposes the true intentions of university vice-chancellors. The major weakness of it is the weakness that the SWP has in most of its campaigns, it offers no real strategy to win. In the end we must ask why the massive student movements in Greece and France which rocked their respective countries when they were faced with similar neoliberal reforms have not happened here. The end chapter concludes with "organise yourselves: together we can change things"<sup>8</sup> - a very uplifting sentiment but not clear enough on the methods and strategy of struggle that students and workers must adopt.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Alexandra Smith 'Students condemn strike 'disruption'', Guardian Unlimited <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/news/story/0,,1725523,00.html> March 2006.

- 2 Alex Callinicos 'Harnessing knowledge to profits' in *Universities In a Neoliberal World* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 2006) Pg. 14.

- 3 *ibid* p 24.

- 4 HEFCE, 'Bout the RAE' 2001 <http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/AboutUs/>

- 5 Callinicos *op cit*.

- 6 *ibid* p 4.

- 7 Polly Curtis 'Women take longer to repay student loans' in *The Guardian* 2 January 2008.

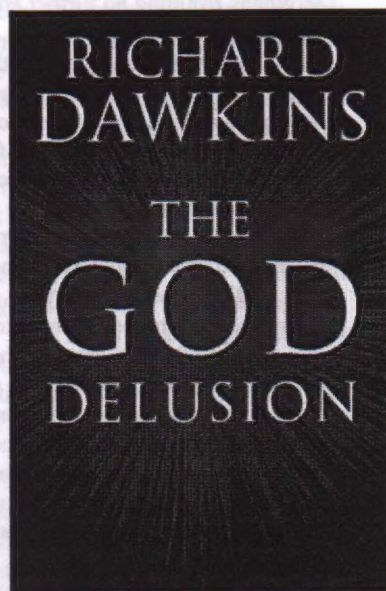
- 8 Callinicos, *op cit* p 4.

# An ultimately crude and one-sided atheism

Marcus Halaby reviews *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins

To many readers, the name of Richard Dawkins will need little introduction. This prominent British biologist has become notorious, both for his strident attacks on creationism and on religious belief in general, and for the near-vitriolic abuse to which he has been subjected for his arguments by US fundamentalist Christians in particular. In "The God Delusion" he seeks to advance the case that the existence or non-existence of God is a scientific hypothesis, one that can be tested empirically and theoretically by the methods of science. It is significant that he made the decision to write this book after "four years of Bush" – a period that has seen a rise in influence for the fundamentalist Christian lobby in US politics, and the parallel rise of fundamentalist Muslim movements in the semi-colonial world. The latter, of course, is largely in response to the unrestrained wars of aggression launched by a US government cheered on by the very same Christian right.

Dawkins begins by trying to define the "God hypothesis" that he wishes to refute. He is not concerned with the religious belief held by respected scientists like Einstein, for whom God makes no intervention into human affairs, nor has any interest in being worshipped. He argues this is hardly a God at all and, rather, his beef is with the personal God who is the creator of the universe – a supernatural and superhuman being that exists outside of his creation and who is worthy of worship. The form that this God commonly takes is what he calls, "the Abrahamic God in all his nastiness"; the Jewish and Muslim God, or his "insipid Christian counterpart, 'gentle Jesus meek and mild'." However, he goes further, examining polytheistic as well as monotheistic religions, he makes the point (p. 57) that he is "not attacking



any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented."

He anticipates the argument that he shows insufficient sensitivity to the beliefs of others, and sets the tone for the rest of the book; by arguing that the "respect" demanded by religious believers for their belief is undeserved. He rightly points to the privileges enjoyed by conscientious objectors to military service when their objection is based on belief rather than secular politics. But Dawkins goes further than this, rejecting the use of what he calls, "euphemisms", to describe wholly "religious" factions engaged in civil war, and he points to Bosnia and Northern Ireland as examples. He reiterates this point when he mentions the controversy over the Danish cartoon depictions of Prophet Mohammad – once again seeing this as a purely religious (and therefore reactionary backlash). Religion is, for

Dawkins, the determining, and reactionary factor in each of these conflicts; the possibility of them having non-religious causes is dismissed out of hand.

America is a key target of Dawkins' polemic. He tries to give a measure of how far it has moved backwards, by pointing out that the American Founding Fathers tended to be committed secularists; whatever their own views on religion, and that many of them were, indeed, deists, agnostics and atheists themselves. He then proceeds to attack "the poverty of agnosticism". He makes the distinction between what he calls "temporary agnosticism in practice" (whose temporary character is that of a scientific hypothesis awaiting validation through empirical evidence, and which he regards as effectively atheistic in practice), and "permanent agnosticism in principle" (which he regards as an evasion of the scientific method through flawed ontological premises).

Having defined his subject and his intended purpose, he deals with the various arguments for God's existence, of which the most famous (in the Western world) are Thomas Aquinas' "five proofs" (an a posteriori argument crucial to the Catholic and Protestant traditions), and the ontological and other a priori arguments such as those of Saint Anselm. This is the part of the book that has come in for the most criticism from "moderate" Christians, arguing, plausibly, that Dawkins demonstrates little interest in or knowledge of the relevant philosophical debates. Indeed, one is tempted to conclude that he is so unable to take the arguments of religious believers seriously that he feels no real need to give them a serious response. However, one need not be an expert in philosophy or ontology to understand that Dawkins is correct and these arguments generally rely upon sleights of hand in their logic, or

on the smuggling in of unjustified assumptions. The first three of Aquinas' proofs, for example (the idea of God as the "First Cause" of all things), relies on the unappealing quality of the idea of an infinite regression of cause and effect, and arbitrarily brings it to an end by an ultimate cause which is called God. Even if one follows this argument, it is difficult to see why this God should have any of the other attributes given to him (super-human, supernatural, concerned with sin and transgression, etc). More to the point, all of these "proofs" base themselves solely on mere thought, and take little or no evidence for their conclusions from the material world.

The arguments from the beauty of the natural world, or from profound or traumatic "personal experience" he similarly dismisses as being too subjective (relying on illusion and hallucination) and insufficiently scientific. The arguments from scripture, on the other hand, suffer from the manifold contradictions within the scriptures (and between the scriptures and recorded history) – a fact that most modern Bible scholars now concede. Continuing the rest of this chapter in a chatty and informal style, Dawkins jokingly points out that "Pascal's wager" – the idea that the risk of eternal damnation makes belief a sensible proposition, no matter how long the odds on God's existence actually are – is really an argument for feigning belief, something that is hardly likely to convince an omniscient God in any case.

Dawkins then moves on to territory that is more familiar to him, and uses Darwin's theory of evolution to deal with the argument from design, in order to prove "why there almost certainly is no God". His argument, essentially, is that Darwinian natural selection, far from positing random chance as the likely creator of apparently irreducible complexity in the natural world, shows that small improbable events (in the course of biological evolution) can accumulate to produce results (complex organisms) whose existence would be much more unlikely had they simply come into existence fully-formed. Or, to put it another way, Darwinian natural selection reduces apparently irreducible complexities by introducing the power of accumulation.

In contrast, any argument in favour of creation by design raises the question of who designed the designer, a being who must surely be more complex (and there-

fore even more improbable) than the most improbable life forms whose creation his existence is meant to explain. He argues that creationism essentially consists of the "worship of gaps" (in our scientific understanding), placing God in those spaces that science has not yet filled with plausible hypotheses supported by empirical evidence, and effectively telling scientists to refrain from filling those spaces in our human knowledge. By contrast, the scientific outlook revels in the discovery of gaps, not as facts accomplishing requiring no further enquiry, but as spurs to research.

In Chapter 8 ("What's wrong with religion? Why be so hostile?") Dawkins attempts a defense of his fierce hostility to religion by pointing out how fundamentalist religion subverts science and its achievements, as well as the other achievements of capitalist modernity. A perennial theme throughout his book is that religion is not necessary for moral behaviour, and indeed, often distorts it into its opposite. For example, he discusses the way that religious faith persecutes homosexuality and other forms of consensual sexual behaviour, and the way that religious arguments about the sanctity of human life have been used to justify the murder of pro-abortion doctors in the US.

From these quite sensible propositions, Dawkins then massively over-stretches his argument. He argues that moderation in religion fosters fanaticism, in that, without a heaven and a hell to believe in, extremist fanatics would be unable to commit atrocities such as 9/11, or the London bus and tube bombings of 7 July 2005. Here, as with his previous comments on Bosnia and Northern Ireland, he is quick to attribute a religious cause (existing at the level of an individual person's belief, or the lack of it) to deal with events that have much wider, non-religious, roots.

He ends the book by presenting a hypothesis that religion exists as the evolutionary remnant of ideas that arose to fill gaps in humanity's understanding and self confidence, explaining, exhorting, consoling and inspiring in much the same way that the phenomenon of the childhood "imaginary friend" does. He presents his own, secular humanist world-view as an alternative, showing that the achievements of science, constantly pushing against the limits of human understanding, are much more

capable of providing consolation and inspiration than religion is. He insists, that the discovery that there are no limits to this understanding may be the best and most inspiring discovery that we can make.

In insisting that all science is tacitly, if not overtly atheistic in its basic assumptions, and offering a rigorous defence of the scientific revolution and modernity, there is much in Dawkins' work that is useful. But, sadly, these are seriously negated by his tendency to see the world through what is ultimately a crude and one-sided atheism. It is in Chapters 5 to 7 ("The Roots of Religion", "The Roots of Morality: Why Are We Good?" and "The Good Book and the Changing Moral Zeitgeist") that we can step away from cheering on Dawkins' belligerence in the face of obscurantism, and witness firsthand the limitations of his outlook. Applying the ideas of Darwinian natural selection again, this time to religion itself, he tries to identify the "direct advantages of religion" that have allowed religious ideas to survive and reproduce.

Unfortunately, most of the hypothetical mechanisms he posits for this Darwinian imperative are psychological ones and exist, yet again, at the level of individual belief, or at most at the level of the survival and reproduction of groups of individuals sharing the same beliefs. It is notable that he refers to Karl Marx only once – in a later section dealing with the claim that atheism inspired the behaviour of such amoral monsters as Hitler and Stalin. He refers, indirectly, to Marx's famous dictum that religion is the "opium of the people" (describing it as the claim that "religion is a tool used by the ruling class to subjugate the underclass"), only to dismiss it almost as a conspiracy theory, unable to explain "why people are vulnerable to the charms of religion and therefore open to exploitation by priests, politicians and kings".

Realising that his hypothetical mechanisms are themselves also insufficient to explain this, he is forced to fall back on the idea that religion might be a by-product of the imperative towards group survival and social cohesion by primitive societies, and that humans are psychologically primed for religion by evolutionary impulses that have other purposes. Asking the rhetorical question "Does our moral sense have a Darwinian origin?" he tries to argue morality can and does exist independently of religious

belief, rather than scripture, and that in any case, it is a good thing that those who claim to get their morals from scripture do not really do so in practice.

In a very bold fashion, Dawkins proceeds to take us through a tour of the cruel, vindictive and misogynistic morality offered by a literal reading of the Old Testament, before showing that the New Testament is little better. He uses the moral abhorrence he encourages the reader to hold of such values, to show there is, or at least should be, a universal morality. That is, a "changing moral zeitgeist" evolving progressively in a more rational and tolerant direction with the advance of scientific knowledge and modernist social and technical achievement. This moral zeitgeist might be summarized in talk show host Jerry Springer's catchphrase "be good to yourselves, and each other". Dawkins insists we should not judge the individual behaviour of others, except in so far as it is harmful or where they are also being judgmental. He concurs with Salman Rushdie that there is only one major obstacle blocking (and occasionally reversing) this relentless march of Progress – a problem that goes by the name "God".

This, then, is Dawkins' world-view, in all its belligerent scientificity, and its liberal limitations. It is nothing more than the world-view of the old-fashioned, nineteenth century Victorian empiricist liberal rationalist – and in this regard, is curiously English in its preoccupations. Or, if one throws in Darwinian natural selection (a highly dialectical concept when not used mechanically as a type of panacea), it resembles the idealist dialectic of Hegel, with science and atheism replacing the Prussian absolute monarchy as the embodiment of Hegel's "Absolute Idea". By contrast, Marx's critique of religion – for whom religion is not just "the opium of the people" but also the "heart of a heartless world" – is much more rounded than the near-conspiracy theory that Dawkins presents it as. Presented in its most developed form by Frederick Engels in his "Origins of the Family, Private Property and State", Marxism places the development of religious ideas in the context of the development of the social organism – its material and social development, and in particular, the development of social classes with irreconcilable interests, and the struggle between them to which this

gives rise.

By this view, religions develop and survive because they reflect, in however distorted a form, the standpoint and interests of a real material force in society – a social class, defined by its relationship to property and to other social classes. Or, often enough, they reflect the standpoint and interests of more than one such social class. They necessarily do so in a distorted form. This is partly because all ideas produced by and held by the dominant classes in society must seek to obscure the exploitative nature of their domination, and also because a religion that is embraced by millions from all classes of society must try to appeal to and to reconcile these irreconcilable interests.

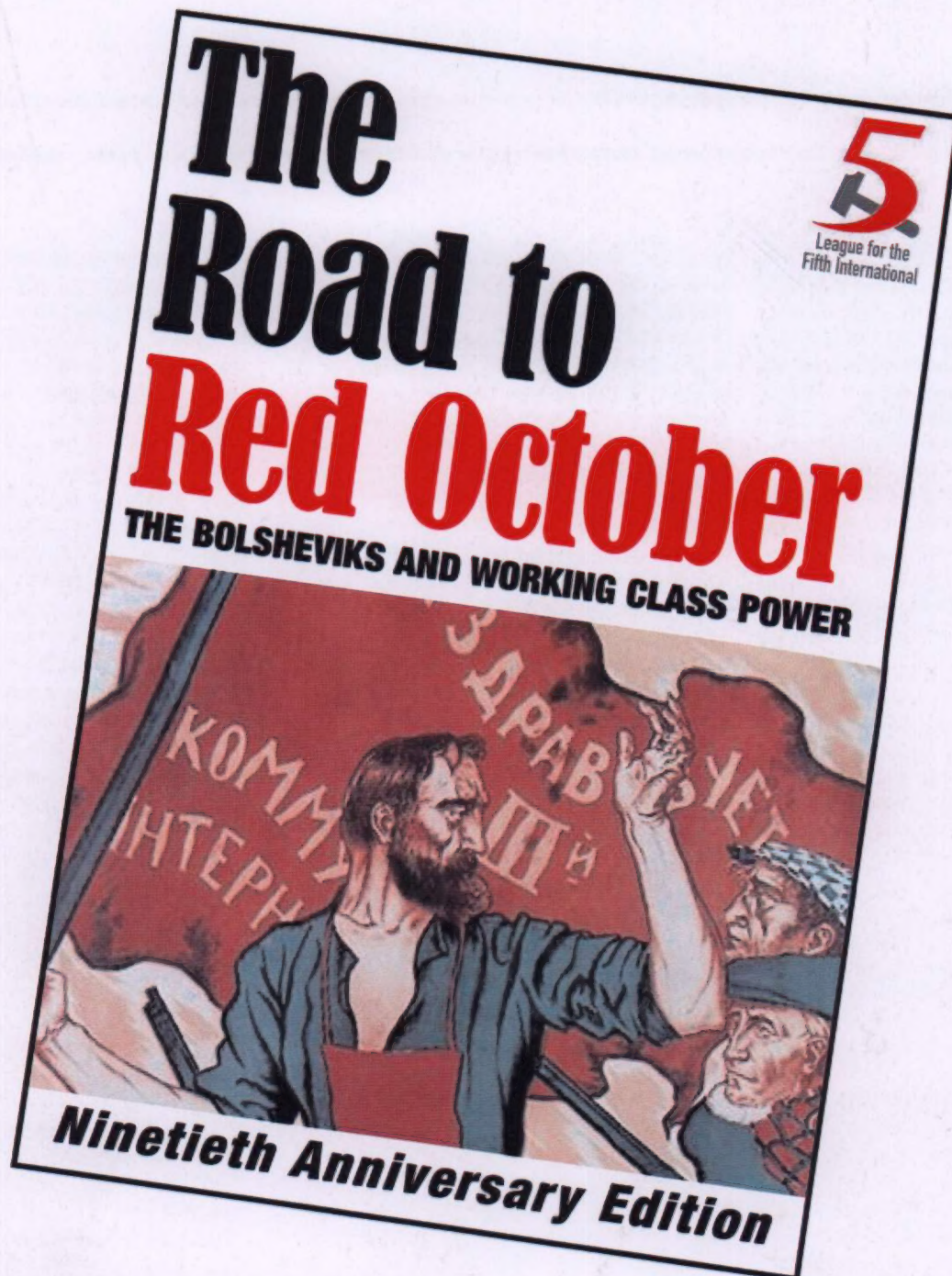
This can sometimes have inconvenient short-term results for the dominant classes for whom a particular religion otherwise expresses their overall and long-term interest. For example, with the ideas found in all major religions denouncing tyranny and injustice, promoting charity, and glorifying the poor and oppressed. One might well observe the current rise of political Islam, the 1979 Iranian revolution and the "social message" of movements like Hamas and Hizballah in this context. One should add for good measure that, precisely because all religions obscure the material forces at work in society in favour of the non-material notions of "good" and "evil", that no religious movement of the oppressed has ever proved capable of resolving the problems of exploitation that gave rise to it in the first place.

On occasion, however, such ideas might serve as an inspiration for the oppressed classes; by turning generally-accepted notions originating from religion against their historic beneficiaries in the dominant class, and putting them to their own purpose, changing the class content of these ideas in the process, and sometimes leading to the emergence of new religions out of old ones. It should therefore not surprise us that the great religious schisms of history have generally coincided with the rise and fall of particular social classes. To take one example (well-known in the Marxist tradition), and to present it schematically, one might say that Protestantism developed as the movement of rebellion of a rising bourgeois class against a Catholic church that represented the interests of the old feudal nobility, in a society in

which the Catholic church was both the biggest landowner and the primary source of legitimacy.

Even the moral zeitgeist of which Dawkins speaks so highly can be analysed according to this method. The failure of the Protestant Reformation to remake European Christendom in a bourgeois mould (except, in a limited way, in Britain, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia), plus the almost complete identification between the Catholic church and the rulers of sixteenth century Europe's super-power, the French absolutist monarchy, meant that the next great wave of bourgeois rebellion had to take the ideological form of an attack on religion, bringing into being the ideas of secularism, atheism, agnosticism, deism and so forth in the modern form that Dawkins discusses at the beginning of his book. The Catholic church, for its part, survived both the Reformation and the great French revolution of 1789 by adapting itself to that part of the new ruling class, the bourgeoisie, that feared future revolutionary upheavals, and later on by appealing to the frustrations of those oppressed classes for whom capitalist modernity meant a worsening, rather than an improvement, of their social condition.

There is not a word of this in Dawkins' book – nor any similar analysis of the origin and evolution of the other great religious (Islam, Hinduism and so forth). His moral zeitgeist is capable of mocking the evident absurdities of the religious ideas of the great unwashed masses, and the cynicism with which religious and secular elites make use of these ideas. It is unable, however, to explain the source of the great contradiction with which he tries to grapple – that the achievements of capitalist modernity conflict with the ideas of religion in all sorts of ways, but at the same time reproduce religious belief like smallpox. To do so, one would have to denounce those other absurdities, perhaps less evident to those less directly affected by them, of a society in which we all have to bow down to the blind gods of profit-making and the market, by contrast with whom the nastiest, most vindictive and irrational god of any revealed religion must look positively benign.



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